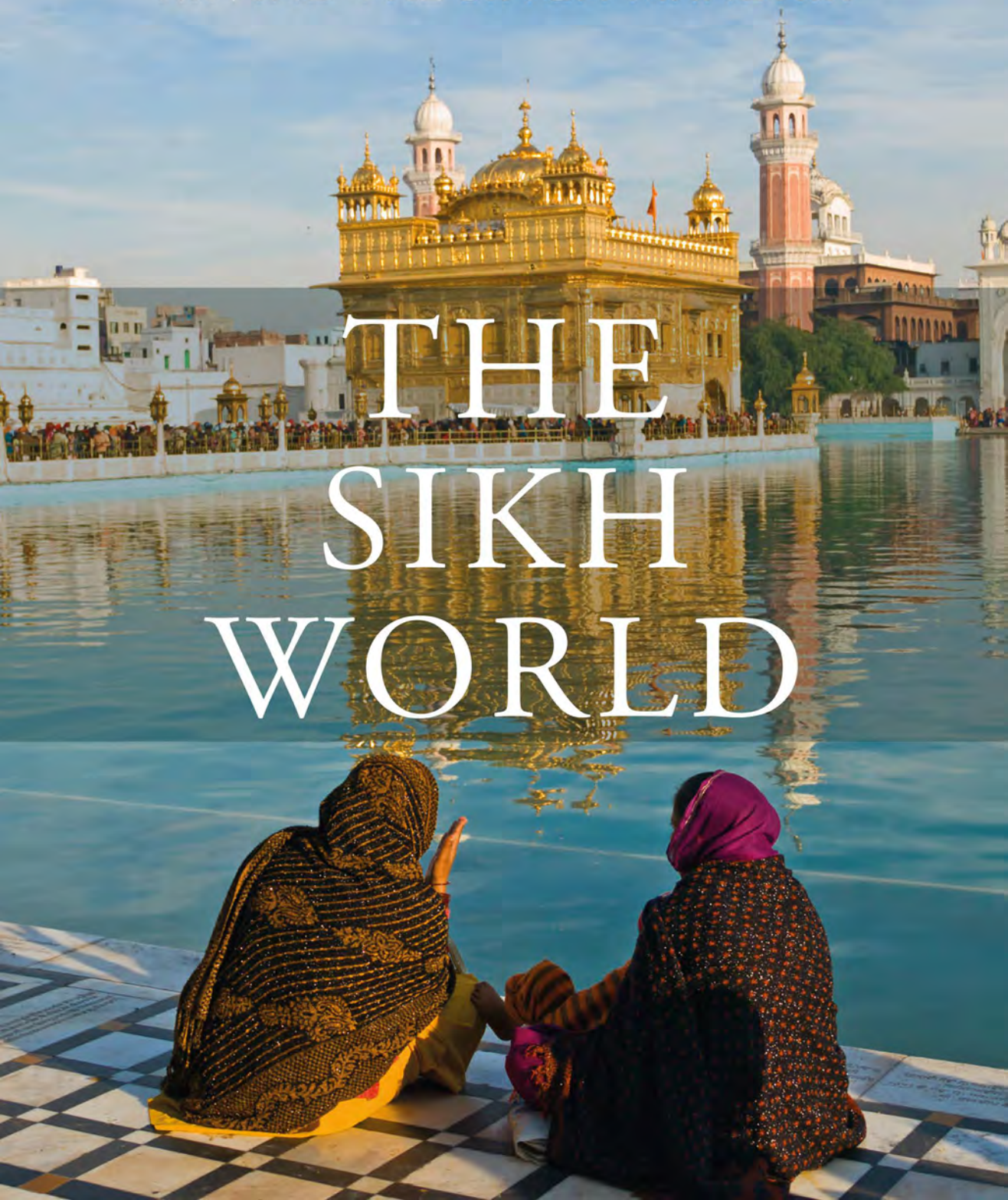


Edited by
 PASHAURA SINGH *and*
 ARVIND-PAL SINGH MANDAIR

THE SIKH WORLD



THE SIKH WORLD

The Sikh World is an outstanding guide to the Sikh faith and culture in all its geographical and historical diversity. Written by a distinguished team of international contributors, it contains substantial thematic articles on the dynamic living experiences of the global Sikh community. The volume is organized into ten distinct sections:

- History, Institutions, and Practices
- Global Communities
- Ethical Issues
- Activism
- Modern Literature and Exegesis
- Music, Visual Art, and Architecture
- Citizenship, Sovereignty, and the Nation-State
- Diversity and Its Challenges
- Media
- Education

Within these sections, interdisciplinary themes such as intellectual history, sexuality, ecotheology, art, literature, philosophy, music, cinema, medicine, science and technology, politics, and global interactions are explored.

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Dr. Sahib Singh (1892–1977)

Dr. Taran Singh (1922–1981)

Dr. Ganda Singh (1900–1987)

Dr. Darshan Singh Tatla (1947–2021)

Professor Jagtar Singh Grewal (1927–2022)



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PREFACE

The Routledge Taylor & Francis Group has been publishing substantial academic texts in *The Routledge Worlds* series. These texts are geared towards advanced graduate students as well as research scholars and often include the world's leading authorities on the respective subjects of each individual volume. What makes these texts so exciting are their scope and the fact that they often set the pace of the field with which they deal. The present volume contains 45 essays by a team of international experts in the field of Sikh studies, integrating the study of Sikhism within a wide range of critical and, in many ways, postcolonial perspectives on the nature of religion, history, philosophy, institutions, culture, society, literature, music, art, architecture, gender, diaspora, ethno-nationalism, and mediatic expressions. It will provide a suitably lucid and critically nuanced volume, which integrates all these perspectives into a single framework, innovation well in keeping with the mandate of the new series of *The Routledge Worlds*. This volume is being published online as well as in the print form.

Our foremost gratitude goes to Rebecca Shillabeer, senior editor, Routledge Religion, for inviting us to bring out this timely volume in the field of Sikh studies. The work on this volume has stretched over several years because the extraordinary environment of COVID-19 pandemic delayed this project. We thank Iman Hakimi for accommodating our requests for extending the deadlines. We also acknowledge the support of the Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of California, Riverside, Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Trust, International Sikh Foundation of Palo Alto, California, Tara Singh and Balwant Kaur Chatha and Gurbax Singh and Kirpal Kaur Brar Endowed Professorship in Sikh Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the Sikh Studies Association of Michigan. As a matter of fact, this volume has been a significant venture for us, given that its progress was interrupted and significantly slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared in early 2020. For this reason, we wish to thank our esteemed authors for their patience and collaboration at a time when all academics had to put a lot of effort into learning new ways to teach remotely. We thank them also for accepting our critique of their work in the process of revision with grace and perseverance during this difficult period.

The Sikh World is divided into ten sections, covering historical, philosophical, institutional, diasporic, geopolitical, ethics, activism, literary, artistic, cultural and mediatic worlds, and ending with a focus on the future directions of educational institutions and the field of modern Sikh studies. Although the essays are well documented and discuss certain sensitive issues in a scholarly fashion,

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the interpretations are the responsibility of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of the editors, sponsors of the volume, or the publishers. Some contributors withdrew from this project at the eleventh hour for personal reasons. We wish to record our gratitude both to those colleagues who met the deadlines and those who stepped in at short notice to fill unanticipated gaps. Our earnest thanks go to our spouses, Baljeet Kaur and Preet Kaur Mandair, who provided their unflinching support on a number of occasions when we were facing some letdowns. This volume is dedicated to the loving memory of Dr. Sahib Singh (1892–1977), Dr. Taran Singh (1922–1981), Dr. Ganda Singh (1900–1987), Dr. Darshan Singh Tatla (1947–2021), and Professor Jagtar Singh (J.S.) Grewal (1927–2022) with gratitude for their scholarly contributions and admiration for their vision. They have been the trailblazers for new generations of scholars.

Pashaura Singh
Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair



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INTRODUCTION

Pashaura Singh and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair

In line with the pattern established in the series of Routledge Worlds, the present volume on the “Sikh world” contains substantial thematic articles on a variety of topics that examine the living experience of the global Sikh community (Panth). It consists of original pieces by scholars and writers in the field of Sikh studies, making it international in scope. The volume covers interdisciplinary themes such as intellectual history, philosophy, ethics, sexuality, art, literature, music, cinema, politics, global interactions, and so on. We hope that readers will find it to be an interesting and intellectually stimulating volume that integrates textual evidence as well as theoretical reflection in the context of Sikh practice. Two aspects of this volume stand out: first, its strong emphasis on how the Sikh world is a dynamically evolving phenomenon and diverse form of life, and second, the contributions of established scholars and a new generation of scholars who are actively researching and attuned to the pulse of the various Sikh life-worlds.

Geographically and culturally, the Sikh tradition originated more than five centuries ago in the Punjab (“Five Rivers”) region of northwestern India, a frontier zone where the interaction between different segments of the society and cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, and India was commonplace. This new tradition was rooted in the religious experience, piety, and culture of that period and informed by the unique inner revelations of its founder, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who declared his independence from the other schools of thought in his day. Notwithstanding the influences he absorbed from his contemporary religious environment, suffused with the thought and ideals of the medieval poet-saints of North India with whom he shared certain similarities as well as major differences, Guru Nanak laid the foundation of a new spiritual movement, which kindled the fire of autonomy and courage in his first disciples (Sikhs) who gathered around him at Kartarpur (“Creator’s Abode”), a town which he himself founded in 1519 on the right bank of River Ravi. His creative ideas and strategies triggered the process of institutionalization in the early Sikh tradition during the last two decades of his life. His specific ethical formulations based on “sovereignty, truth, love, justice and equality” became a viable model of a new social organization beyond the grip of hierarchical and discriminatory caste system based upon *varna* (“color”) ethos of the Hindu tradition. Guru Nanak’s rejection of the prevailing orthodoxies of both Islamic and Hindu traditions provided an alternative spiritual paradigm that became the basis of social reconfiguration according to divinely sanctioned normative principles.

The global population of the Sikhs is about 27 million, which has exceeded the worldwide population of Jewish people. The major demographic concentration of the Sikhs is in the Punjab, where they are about 2% of India's more than one billion people. What makes Sikhs significant in India is not their numbers but their contribution in the cultural, political, and economic spheres. About 20 million Sikhs live in the state of Punjab, while the rest have settled in other parts of India and elsewhere throughout the world. These include substantial communities of Sikhs in Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, East Africa, United Kingdom, mainland European countries, and North America through successive waves of emigration. In the last century, more than half a million Sikhs immigrated to the United States of America.

It is increasingly recognized that far from being monolithic and homogenous, the Sikh tradition has fostered a seemingly unending number of dominant, institutional, regional, national, and local expressions in constant dynamic relationship with one another, continually influencing each other and defining and redefining what it has meant and continues to mean to be a Sikh in different places around the globe. Even within the Sikh world and amongst those who consider themselves Sikhs, there are many different manifestations of that faith itself. The Internet has further exposed the diversity of Sikh life in its global context. In fact, the Sikh Panth has always been involved in the process of "renewal and re-definition" throughout its history. It is no wonder that the very notion of the Sikh world has been continuously evolving in relation to the historical context. It is naïve to think that the Sikh world during the time of Guru Nanak and the early Sikh community at Kartarpur in the early decades of the sixteenth century could be the same as the Sikh world of today's Panth whether in the Punjab or in the diaspora.

There is an urgent need to look at the Sikh world as a dynamic phenomenon, shifting through time, finding its manifestation to the pressures of the moment. Nevertheless, there are symbolic touchstones, especially the twin doctrine of Guru-Granth and Guru-Panth, shaping the living experience of the Sikh community under different historical circumstances. This volume provides an authoritative and accessible source of information on topics of relevance, concern, and interest. For this purpose, it is organized into ten distinct sections: (1) History, Institutions, and Practices; (2) Global Sikh Communities; (3) Ethical Issues; (4) Contemporary Activism; (5) Modern Literature and Exegesis; (6) Music, Visual Art, and Architecture; (7) Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Nation-State; (8) Diversity and Its Challenges; (9) Media; and finally (10) Education.

The Sikh World incorporates several unique features, making this volume significantly different from existing survey volumes in Sikh studies. Good examples are the *Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* and two different projects that are currently in progress – *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism* and the (Springer) *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, each of which has a substantial stand-alone volume on Sikhism. These volumes provide useful historical and encyclopedic surveys of Sikhism but do not venture in any substantial way into the contemporary lifeworld of Sikhs and Sikhism. In contrast *The Sikh World* builds on the significant recent growth in new research and a major generational shift in scholarship on Sikh studies. Evidence of these shifts can be seen in the Routledge journal *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture and Theory*. Much of this new research explores the application of concepts and ideas to the contemporary Sikh world and charting its development in new and exciting direction, and this effort is being spearheaded by younger scholars specializing in the social sciences, anthropology, media studies, the visual arts, and so on with a highly interdisciplinary training. This interdisciplinarity is reflected in the organization of the different parts of the volume.

The volume opens with a section on "The Religious Sikh World," focusing on the historical and institutional foundations of the Sikh tradition. The first chapter by Pashaura Singh provides an overview of the canonical period (1469–1708) of early Sikh formations, focusing on the lives, teachings, and contributions of ten Sikh Gurus, from Guru Nanak (1469–1539) through Guru Gobind Singh

(1666–1708). It is followed by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair’s chapter on the uniqueness of the “Concept of *Śabad-Guru*” in the Sikh world, exploring conceptual interconnections between three key terms in the *gurmāt* lexicon: *śabad*, Guru, and Khalsa. Acknowledging and building on established historical and religious studies, this chapter takes a different turn by adopting a more conceptual approach, presenting each of these three terms as key philosophical concepts in their own rights. The next two chapters are focused on the canonical texts of the Sikh tradition, such as the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Dasam Granth* excavated by Pashaura Singh and Robin Rinehart in their respective chapters. While Singh focuses on the genesis, evolution, and canonization of the foundational text of the Sikh world along with its interpretations and role within the Sikh Panth, Rinehart examines the contents of the *Dasam Granth*, namely, verses in praise of God, an autobiography of Guru Gobind Singh, retellings of the battles between the goddess Durga and various demons, accounts of various avatars, verses describing various weapons and their power, an epistle from the tenth Guru to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and a lengthy series of several stories exploring romance and deceit. In the following chapter, Harjeet Singh Grewal examines the network of intertextual references found in early Sikh literature by examining the *Janam-sakhis* (“life-narratives”) related to Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh tradition, and the works of the famous Sikh author Bhai Gurdas and the *Guru Granth Sahib*. He argues that this network of references increases our ability to understand how epistemology and knowledge production occurred in the Sikh tradition. Louis E. Fenech then turns his attention to Persian Works of Guru Gobind Singh, Bhai Nand Lal Goya, and Mobad Shah, making the point that Persian was an equally important language of early Sikh literature and tradition. Examining the Sikh way of life based on canonical texts and the “manuals of code of conduct” (*rahit-nāmās*), Eleanor Nesbitt identifies continuities and changes in their prescriptions and proscriptions at different times. The final two chapters in this section are focused on the central institution of the gurdwara and the public performance of devotional singing (*nagar kirtan*) analyzed by Tejpal Singh Bainiwal and Gurbeer Singh in their respective chapters. While the gurdwara serves as a religious, social, political, and cultural institution, the *nagar kirtan* displays the Sikh lifeworld in the public domain. Singh narrates the history of the *nagar kirtan*, its implications, uses, its relationship with the Guru, and an ethnography of the Yuba City *nagar kirtan*.

The second section provides a wide-ranging overview of the geopolitical Sikh world not only by mapping the development of Sikh communities around the world but by highlighting current social and political controversies, roadblocks, as well as achievements of Sikh communities in different parts of the world. This section is one of the most comprehensive surveys of Sikh diasporic settlement, development, and issues-based activism in a single volume and provides invaluable resource for students of religion, sociology, anthropology, and political science. It opens with a chapter on “The Sikhs in India” by Birinder Pal Singh, offering the demographic features of Sikh population in Punjab and other provinces of India with respect to the issues of Sikh identity and the use for Punjabi language in the non-Punjabi-speaking states. It is followed by Harpreet Singh’s chapter on “Sikhs in Australia and New Zealand,” dealing with early problems of settlement against the growing immigration restrictions against South Asians across the Anglosphere and finally becoming a highly integrated and vibrant part of both New Zealand and Australia. The third chapter on “Sikh Life in Canada” by Michael Hawley examines five spheres – liberalism, “Canadian” nativism, transnationalism and minoritarian connections, *Panjabiyat* (“Punjabi identity”), and Sikh subjectivities – which function in relation to one another to produce new Sikh frames of reference. The next chapter on “Sikhs in/of Africa” by Anneeth Kaur Hundle is focused on imperial, postcolonial, and transnational articulations comprising the Sikh lifeworld in Africa. It examines Sikh presence and the Sikh tradition in Africa, primarily focusing on East Africa across four eras: British imperialism and colonialism in East Africa, decolonization and anticolonial resistance, postcolonial nation-building

and Indian racial exclusion, and neoliberal-era East Africa. The fifth chapter on “Sikhs in Mainland Europe” by Eleanor Nesbitt describes the present-day settlement of Sikh populations based on different migration trajectories, generational change (especially a shift from unskilled to professional employment and changing language proficiency), and finally Europe’s impact on the running of gurdwaras and conduct of life cycle rituals. The final two chapters on “Sikhs in the United Kingdom” and “Sikhs in the United States” by Gurharpal Singh and Sangeeta Kaur Luthra, respectively, describe the brief history of settlement, the patterns of social and economic change within the community, generational differences, community building, fighting discriminatory policies, expressions of faith and identity, and the engagement in British and American civil and political society.

The third section provides a foray into focuses on “Ethical Issues.” This section looks at how Sikhs situate themselves ideologically and practically in relation to major ethical issues, such as gender and sexuality, ecology, as well as death and dying. Three contributors have examined the limits of traditional ideas and practices in rapidly changing technological environment. The opening chapter by Jasleen Singh examines the issues related to gender and sexuality. Exploring the standard practice of understanding gender and religion as identities that are fixated to the cultural and ideological dictates of secular society, the author then examines how Sikh conceptual frameworks open the categories to allow for a more transitive movement of bodies and affect that can break our moral grip over objective knowledge and construction of what constitutes as “proper” Sikh gendered and sexual identity. It is followed by Balbinder Singh Bhogal’s chapter on “Death and Dying Within the Guru Granth Sahib,” explaining that the visible assumes Time/Death-as-World, while the invisible assumes Time/Death-as-Word, leading to an awareness of how the ego-mind is reversed and re-formed to achieve this death-in-life flow of awakened consciousness. The final chapter on “Ecotheology” by Susan E. Prill underlines how Sikhs are engaging in discussions about how to understand their religious obligations in the context of various environmental crises by constructing and enacting a distinctly Sikh ecotheology based on the ideals of *sewā* (“selfless service”) and *sarbat dā bhalā* (“welfare of all”).

The fourth section looks at activism in the Sikh world. Again “activism” has never been targeted as an area of study, yet as the recent research articles in *Sikh Formations* and other journals show, Sikhs have been highly motivated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in response to controversies and threatening circumstances. This section juxtaposes religious and secular-based activism over the past 130 years but aims to put a spotlight on spiritually motivated activism. This is an organic expression of the central ideals of Sikhism and can be seen in the work of organizations such as Nishkam Sevak Jatha of UK, Khalsa Aid, United Sikhs, as well as the work of individuals and smaller groups, which are attempting to explore and adapt Sikh spirituality to the wider world. These kinds of activism are quite different from the more secular and rights-based advocacy-type activism. The first chapter in this section on “Political Activism” is by Amrit Deol, who examines the trajectories and legacies of anticolonial thought and political activism in Punjab. Growing out of vibrant transnational networks, the Babbar Akali Movement and the Kirti-Kisan Party of Punjab represent two distinct sects of political activism, sharing deep-rooted relationship with the Sikh tradition and their connections with revolutionary movements abroad. This is followed by Amandeep Singh’s chapter on the role of the Akal Takht in relation to political activism. Maneuvering through few examples of activist mobilization, the author identifies factors and modes of thinking that motivate power struggles in mundane political discourses. Drawing upon the historical and metahistorical modes of relating with time, he delves into rethinking about the Akal Takht as an institution that holds its significance beyond the domain of raw politics. The final combined chapter deals with the practical application of Sikh ethos in “Transnational Sikh Social Activism,” by Harjeet Singh Grewal and Tejpal Singh Bainiwal, underling the evolution of Sikh activism to enact change while

experiencing “rejection-identification,” which produces stronger community bonds and identification. They use early moments of migration and the experience of discrimination as examples of how this process compels Sikh activism. They also examine moments from the latter half of the twentieth century, such as “turban advocacy,” the developments of Sikh activism in response to the 1984 battle between Sikh freedom fighters and the Indian state, as well as the impact that 9/11 had on Sikh activism, concluding by considering how the Kisan Morcha reveals a consumption of many strategies that the Sikh community has developed in the forum of social activism.

The fifth section looks at literary expressions of the Sikh world. It opens with the chapter on “Sikh Interpretive and Exegetical Traditions” by Puninder Singh, highlighting the world of oral exegesis (*kathā, vichār, viākhiā*) by looking at the relationship between written commentarial exegesis and current forms of oral exegesis that have evolved over the last 30 years, due in no small way to the change in technologies underpinning modes of transmission. Earlier, the colonial encounter and its new ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and technologies also had a profound effect on the development of Sikh interpretive traditions and self-understanding. The previous primarily oral mode of transmission, where interpreters had direct contact with the sangats for whom they interpreted, was augmented, from the late nineteenth century onwards, with the development of new genres of writing that introduced primarily referential works, such as the dictionary, the grammar, and the encyclopedia into the field of interpretation. Developments in communication technologies, from manuscripts, to the printing press, to audiovisual recordings, and most recently to broadcasting and streaming, have each been accompanied by shifts in forms of interpretation. Overall, the aim is to juxtapose literature and oral exegesis as two intersecting modes of cultural transmission and contestation of Sikh concepts and ideas. The second chapter on “Sikh Engagements with Modern Punjabi Literature” by Anne Murphy centers on the work of two prominent writers from the first generation of modern writers: Gurbakhsh Singh *Prītlāī* (1885–1977) and, more extensively, Kartar Singh Duggal (1917–2012), to consider the ways modern Punjabi literature has allowed for the expression of political and social possibilities that have been occluded in the domain of conventional politics. The final chapter on the “Literature of the Sikh Diaspora” by Parvinder Mehta examines the literary productions of diaspora writers, dealing with the issues faced by the immigrant community. She argues that the global migration of Sikhs from India to other parts of the world created the need for Sikhs to have their concerns addressed through creative works. Reviewing the common themes entailed in migration as dislocation, homelessness, and discriminatory sense of estrangement, she illustrates how diverse challenges of identities faced by writers of the Sikh diaspora have contributed to building an emerging canon of Sikh formations and identities.

The sixth section focuses on music, visual art, architecture, and the preservation of cultural heritage. One of the most vibrant and rapidly expanding areas of cultural expression in the contemporary Sikh world is that of music and visual arts. This section opens with Francesca Cassio’s chapter on “Singing the Scripture” to critically examine Sikh kirtan in literature, practices, and musicological studies through a decolonial lens by contextualizing song-forms within pre-modern devotional literature, where they constitute a unit with poetic compositions. It is followed by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s chapter on “The Five Essentials of Early Sikh Art,” examining the 57 visuals of Guru Nanak’s life stories in the B40 Janamsakhi. In her analysis of the style and iconography, she retrieves five essentials of Sikh art: (1) new “Sikh” identity, (2) biophilial existentiality, (3) pluralistic iconography, (4) wondrous *khushi* (“happiness”), and (5) transcendent materiality. The third combined chapter on “Contours of *Kalākārī*” by Tavleen Kaur and Jagdeep Singh Raina explores contemporary Sikh art and artists in the global diaspora, highlighting realist expressions of painting sculpture, jewelry, textiles, calendar art, growing areas of fusion and hip-hop music, poetry, theater, and film, including 3D-printed art, and app-based games to reflect the richness and diversity in visual art. The

fourth chapter on “Conservation of Heritage in Punjab” by Gurmeet S. Rai contends that material culture is intrinsically anchored in principles of Sikh way of life, underlining the point that memory, faith, and tradition continue to determine the cultural narratives of the people of Punjab. The final chapter on “Sikh Architecture” by Jaspreet Kaur endeavors to trace the architectural evolution of gurdwaras to understand the term “Sikh architecture” vis-à-vis the faith, region, and time by exploring the spatial planning of historical Sikh shrines.

The seventh section on “The Political Sikh World” deals with the issues of citizenship, sovereignty, and nation-state. It gives us a glimpse into how the Sikh world has been affected by its interactions with modern secular government and how Sikhs have modulated their articulations of sovereignty in relation to the challenges of secularism in contexts such as India, Canada, the UK, and USA. Specifically, this section looks at how Sikhs have positioned themselves in relation to the demand for definition as a “religious” group and how this has affected the politics of multiculturalism and expressions of Sikh nationalism in multiple contexts. The opening chapter on “Elements of Sikh Social and Political Philosophy” by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair sets the tone for this section (and speaks to the section on Sikh activism as well) by showing the key concepts of Sikh philosophy in relation to several important themes in sociopolitical theory: (1) pluralism; (2) activism and social justice; (3) statehood and sovereignty. The basic thrust of this chapter is to present some social and political implications of *gurmata* concepts, the broad thrust of the chapter shows how a Sikh philosophical worldview might converge or differ from the dominant paradigm of liberalism. It is followed by Conner Singh VanderBeek’s chapter on “Sikh Sovereignty and Modern Government,” underlining the notion of sovereignty in relation to modern government. The author argues that Sikh movements for agency, whether based in political parties, activist groups, or community organization, are circumscribed by the power structures within each state and broader vocabularies of modern government. The third chapter on “Sikhs and Multiculturalism” by Rita Kaur Dharmoon examines the three ways in which liberal multiculturalism has become relevant to Sikhs in Western contexts, namely (1) ethno-cultural-religious claims and values, (2) multiculturalism as a governance tool used by state actors to manage difference and consolidate dominant conceptions of the nation-state, and (3) a rejection of liberal multiculturalism because it cannot go far enough in confronting or transforming racism against Sikhs and other non-white peoples. The final chapter on “Sikh Nationalism” by Gurharpal Singh argues that for the Sikhs as a complex community with competing narratives of self-identity – as a religion, as an ethnicity, and as a global and national minority (in India and in the diaspora) – the study of nationalism requires an integrated framework that recognizes the rich symbolic heritage and how the nation and state-building projects of India and Pakistan have defined Sikh politics and the need to rethink the role of the diaspora as an agent of long-distance nationalism in a world where secular nationalism is being overshadowed by the rise of religious nationalisms.

The eighth section explores “Diversity and Its Challenges to the Sikh World,” covering issues such as diversity, caste, race, and irreligiosity. It includes a chapter on Sikh sects with specific reference to the resurgence of the Nihang movement in the last 25 years. It opens with Toby Braden Johnson’s chapter on “Diverse Groups Within the Panth,” examining the diverse groups that claim a connection to the Sikh Gurus’ teachings in matters that do not align with the mainstream normative Khalsa identity. This chapter pays attention to reinterpretations of what it means to be a Khalsa, as well as which worship practices are emphasized and their place in today’s multicultural globalized society. It is followed by a chapter on “Caste Groups” by Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, exploring the lived experience of *zāt* (“caste”) amongst Sikhs. The third chapter on “Racism or Mistaken Identity?” by Jagbir Jhutti-Johal examines the rise in visible attacks against Sikhs after 9/11 and tries to unpack the data to understand whether there is a growing upsurge in actual anti-Sikh hate crimes

or Islamophobic attacks against Sikhs arising due to mistaken identity. It also examines the role of governments in addressing racial intolerance and hate crimes as well as the influence of Sikh activist groups to protect their communities. The final chapter by Robin Rinehart on “Atheism, Agnosticism, and Irreligiosity” explores the growing global trend of people reporting no religious affiliation and describing themselves as atheists, agnostic, rationalists, cultural, or religious Sikhs, citing the prominent examples of Bhagat Singh, who was an atheist but still highlighting components of Sikh history and Guru Gobind Singh’s leadership, and Khushwant Singh, who was a lifelong agnostic but still kept the Five Ks and who was comforted by Sikh prayers.

The ninth section on “Media” examines how Sikh agency has shifted in relation to different forms of media. Kumool Abbi describes how cinematic representations of Sikhs since the 1960s (in Punjabi cinema and in Western cinema) have tended to present Sikhs through clichéd images. This has undergone significant shifts in the last 15 years. But it is with TV that we see major shifts in Sikh agency. Prior to 2004 Sikhs had little or no influence in representing themselves, being mostly passive recipients or observers. Since around 2004, there have been major shifts as individual Sikh communities and conglomerates have opened their own TV channels in the UK, USA, and Canada as well as India. The politics of these TV channels is particularly interesting. It gives us an idea of the intra-community conflicts and fault lines as well as inter-community tensions that exist and which propel Sikh politics. The presence of Sikhs on the Internet has been written about in individual volumes and in journal papers. The contribution to this section will provide an important overview of the incredibly vibrant Internet scene (including the role of social media) and how it is shaping social politics of the Sikh world daily. The opening chapter in this section on “Sikhs and Cinema” by Kumool Abbi throws light on the changing images of the Sikhs in modern cinemas produced by Bollywood in India as well as Hollywood. It examines the evolution and factors responsible for changing facets of Sikh identity in the cinematic medium, with a focus on how the visible presence of Sikhs coincides with their growing economic, social, and cultural dominance in India as well as the diaspora. The appearance of Sikhs in Hollywood and Bollywood is examined in the context of contemporary events such as 9/11, globalization, and the emergence of a visible diaspora. The quest for Sikh identity in the complex world of Punjabi cinema is also highlighted and interpreted through the lens of the partition and the post-militancy phase coinciding with the decline and revival of Punjabi cinema. It is followed by Jasjit Singh’s article on the emergence and impact of Sikh television channels on the rapidly changing mediatic world. It explores the establishment of “Sikh Television Channels” in the United Kingdom, including various types of programming broadcast and several issues leading to a breach of state broadcasting regulations. The third chapter on “Internet” by Conner Singh VanderBeek examines the rapid growth of this media among the Sikhs at the global level. It interrogates how the Internet intensifies identities by discussing the rise of Sikh websites and tracing various consolidating narratives and frameworks of *Sikhi* constructed on these sites. The Internet provides spaces through which the Sikh faith and its associated identities and practices can be debated and ultimately standardized. The final chapter on “Social Media” by Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker reflects on the changing contours of the Sikh world. Through social media, Sikhs are creating a virtual world that represents multiple dimensions of Sikh identity, agency, and expression at the intersections of art, activism, entertainment, education, and religion. While these spaces empower diverse Sikh voices and create global communities, social media operates within authoritarian domains and an attention to economy that ranks, tracks, and silos users, erases diverse voices, creates polarizing perspectives, and unearths various forms of cyber-violence. In response to this basic problem, however, Sikhs can harness the wide-ranging capabilities of social media to tell their own stories, educate public audiences, garner political support, and build solidarity.

The tenth and the last section looks at the “World of Sikh Education.” The contributions to this section chart the rise of Sikh schools in the UK and India and the kind of influence they are beginning to exert. The future development of Sikh schools and academies parallels the development of TV and Internet usage by Sikhs. The opening chapter by Prabhjap Singh Jutla provides a comprehensive treatment of “Sikh Schools and Academies in England,” focusing their historical development. The author argues that Sikh Schools have drawn on a variety of influences based on traditions of community service, the work of established religious organizations, existing minority language provision in mainstream schools, the extensive informal Sikh education sector in British gurdwaras, and a class of Sikh professionals committed to blending Sikhism into the mainstream UK curriculum. The second chapter on “Sikh Schools in India” by Yamini Agarwal provides an ethnographic study of institutions established by Sikh managements, categorized as minority educational institutions across India except in Punjab, where the Sikhs are in a numerical majority, posing serious challenge for Sikh school managements by raising pertinent questions on their mandate, relevance, as well as diversity and inclusion of students. The very last chapter on “Modern Sikh Studies” is jointly composed by the editors of this volume, both of whom are uniquely qualified to make a statement on this important topic in the form of a conversation between them. Sikh studies is an intellectual formation where the social, political, educational, intellectual, and spiritual aspirations of progressive diasporic Sikhs have strongly intersected. Diverging from the conventional “essay” format of earlier chapters in this volume, this particular chapter adopts a conversational interview format to examine the growth of endowed Sikh chairs in North America and the controversies and community politics behind these institutional developments. In many ways this article on endowed Sikh Chairs brings together all aspects of the Sikh world in the sense of creating a real intellectual, cultural, and spiritual bridges between the various Sikh life-worlds (historical and contemporary) and the outside world.

In sum, this volume on the Sikh world represents the scholastic experience of both senior and junior academics working in the fields of Sikh studies, South Asian studies, and other related areas of history, philosophy, anthropology, ethnomusicology, arts, architecture, gender and sexuality, diaspora, mediatic and performance studies. It is presented to a wider audience of scholars and students alike for critical appraisal so that new ways of understanding the dynamic nature of the Sikh world are developed in the future. Its main appeal will be to the younger generations of Sikhs in the diaspora (particularly in USA, UK, Canada, Mainland European Countries, Australia, New Zealand, and East Africa) and in the Indian subcontinent as well as general non-Sikh audience interested in understanding the intersection of religion and politics, including ethnonationalism in the modern world.

PART I

History, Institutions, and Practices



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THE SIKH GURUS

Unity and Continuity of the Office of Authority

Pashaura Singh

Introduction

The formation of early Sikh community (Panth) and its evolution took place under the guidance of the ten personal Gurus, from Guru Nanak (1469–1539) through Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708). The place, function, and authority of the Guru in the Sikh world must be understood in the living experience of the Panth. Literally, the Punjabi term *gurū* stands for a human teacher who communicates divine knowledge and guides disciples along the path to liberation. In Sikh usage, however, the notion of the Guru has evolved over time, encompassing four types of spiritual authority: the eternal Guru (*Satgurū*), the personal Guru, Guru-Granth, and Guru-Panth. First, Guru Nanak uses the term “Guru” to refer to *Akāl Purakh* (“The Eternal One”) himself, to the voice of Akal Purakh, and to the Word, the Truth of Akal Purakh. To experience the eternal Guru is to experience divine guidance. This is the main reason why Sikhs use the term *Vāhigurū* (“Hail the Guru!”) for the divine sovereign in praxis. Second, the personal Guru is the channel through which the voice of Akal Purakh becomes audible. Nanak became the embodiment of the eternal Guru only when he received the divine Word and conveyed it to his disciples. The Sikhs believe that the same voice spoke through each of his successors. Third, Sikhs refer to the Sikh scripture as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (GGS). They acknowledge their faith in it as the successor to Guru Gobind Singh, with the same status, authority, and functions as any of the ten human Gurus. Finally, the phrase Guru-Panth refers to the idea that the Guru is mystically present in the corporate body of the Sikh community. The Sikhs’ usage of “Guru,” therefore, is significantly different from that of Hindus and the controversial use of the term for the heads of some Sikh-related sectarian movements (Singh 2019).

The purpose of this opening chapter is to focus on the brief description of the life, teachings and major contributions of each of the ten personal Gurus in the development of the Sikh Panth. It will also investigate the changing historical context in which each Guru had to respond in a specific manner. This canonical period (1469–1708) of the Sikh Gurus made a singular contribution in the process of crystallization of the Sikh tradition and establishing the foundational principles to mark the perimeters of the Sikh world. To explore the concept of the “Sikh” world in the early period, therefore, we will address the following two questions: what made the Sikh world distinctive, and how uniform was that distinctiveness in different historical contexts?

Guru Nanak (1469–1539)

Nanak was the first Guru of the Sikhs who date the foundation of the Panth from his life of teaching and example. He was born on April 15, 1469, to an upper-caste family of professional *Khatri*s (“merchants” of Bedi sub-caste) in the village of Talwandi (present-day Nankana Sahib) in southwest of Lahore in Pakistan. His father, Mahita Kalu, was the keeper of land records (*paṭvārī*) in his native village, and his mother, Tripta, was a pious lady. He had an elder sister Nānakī. On September 24, 1487, he married Sulakhaṇī and became the father of two sons, Sirī Chand (b. 1494) and Lakhmī Dās (b. 1497). Much material concerning his life comes from the *Janam-sākhī*s (“life-narratives”), idealized biographies written after his death that drew heavily on legend and oral tradition.

Guru Nanak’s life can be divided into three distinct phases: his early contemplative years, the enlightenment experience followed by extensive travels, and a pivotal climax that resulted in the establishment of the first Sikh community at Kartarpur (“Creator’s Abode”) in western Punjab. His autobiographical hymn in his *Vār Mājīh* reveals his ecstatic experience, marking the beginning of his spiritual reign to preach the message of the divine Name (*nām*) to his audience (GGs 150). He left his family behind in 1499 to set out on a series of journeys to both Hindu and Muslim places of pilgrimage in India and abroad along with lifelong companion, Mardana, the Muslim bard who used to play rebec (*rabāb*) when Guru Nanak sang the praises of Akal Purakh:

I have seen places of pilgrimage on riverbanks, including shops, cities, and market squares.
I have seen all nine regions of the world, weighing as a merchant the merits and demerits of
each place in the scale of my heart.

(GGs 156)

During his travels, he visited the whole of India, Sri Lanka, the Central Asia, and the Middle East. He reminisced later that his foreign travels took place in accordance with the divine will: “When it pleases You [O Divine Sovereign!]”, we go out to foreign lands; hearing the news of home, we come back again” (GGs 145). On his journeys, Guru Nanak encountered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld. Before Babur’s invasions of India, Guru Nanak had settled at Kartarpur, a town he himself founded on the right bank of Ravi River in 1519 (Singh 2020: 3).

Guru Nanak’s charismatic personality and teaching won him many disciples, who received the message of liberation from self-centeredness (*haumai*) through religious hymns of unique genius and notable beauty. They began to use these hymns in devotional singing (*kirtan*) as part of congregational worship at Kartarpur. Guru Nanak’s creative ideas and strategies triggered the process of institutionalization in the early Sikh tradition. His specific ethical formulations based on the fundamental values of “truth, love, humility, justice, and equality” became a viable model of a new social organization beyond the grip of hierarchical caste system in India. Guru Nanak’s rejection of the prevailing orthodoxies of both Islamic and Hindu tradition provided an alternative spiritual paradigm that became the basis of social reconfiguration according to divinely sanctioned normative principles (Singh 2019).

Guru Nanak’s teachings are contained in his 974 authentic works, including his celebrated *Japjī* at the very beginning of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (GGs 1–8), a liturgical prayer which is aptly regarded as the quintessence of the whole Sikh scripture, and which is recited by devout Sikhs from memory after waking and bathing before dawn. His three compositions employ the metrical form of the heroic Punjabi ballad called *vār* to produce long poems of instructions, the most famous being the

magnificent *Āsā kī Vār* (GGS 462–475), sung in the early morning musical performance (*chauṁkī*) in all gurdwaras around the world. These poetic compositions provide us with a “unique combination of a potent lyricism, typically expressing a passionate yearning for the divine, with a disciplined organizational power manifest in the coherence of his teachings, whether expressed in short *shaloks* or longer genres which he skillfully adapted or invented” (Shackle 2014: 111). A single codex of Guru Nanak’s writings came into being at Kartarpur referred to as a *pothī* (“volume”) in early Sikh literature, which he bestowed on his successor when he transferred his authority to him.

Guru Nanak’s spiritual message found expression at Kartarpur through three key institutions: the *saṅgat* (holy fellowship), in which all felt they belonged to one large spiritual fraternity; the *dharamsālā*, the original form of the Sikh place of worship; and the *laṅgar*, the communal meal, prepared as a community service by members of the congregation, that is served to everyone attending the Sikh place of worship (*gurdwārā*) and that requires people of all castes and conditions to sit side by side in status-free rows – female next to male, socially high next to socially low, ritually pure next to ritually impure – and share the same food. This was the first practical expression of Guru Nanak’s spiritual mission to reform the society. The institution of the *laṅgar* promoted egalitarianism, community service (*sewā*), unity, and belonging while striking down a major aspect of the caste system.

Guru Nanak defined the ideal person of the Kartarpur community as a *Gurmukh* (“one oriented towards the Guru”) who practiced the threefold discipline of *nām-dān-iśnān*, “the divine Name, charity and purity” (GGS: 942). Corresponding to the cognitive, the communal, and the personal aspects of the evolving Sikh identity, these three features – “Name” (*nām*, relation to the Divine), “charity” (*dān*, relation to the society), and “purity” (*iśnān*, relation to self) – established a balance between the development of the individual and the society. Guru Nanak explicitly refers to his path as the *Gurmukh-Panth* to distinguish it from the Brahmanical, the ascetical, and the Islamic traditions of his day (Grewal 2011: 1). The authenticity and power of his spiritual message ultimately derived not from his relationship with the received forms of tradition but rather from his direct access to Divine Reality through personal experience. Such direct access was the ultimate source of his message that provided him with a perspective on life by which he could fully understand, interpret, and adjudicate the various elements of existing traditions. He conceived of his work as divinely commissioned, and he required that his followers must obey the divine command as an ethical duty (Singh 2014: 22).

Guru Nanak had a vision of an enduring and organized religious community and made provision for continuing effective leadership of it before he passed away in 1539. For this purpose, he created the institution of the Guru, an institution that was to function as the central authority in community life. Thus, he designated his disciple Lahiṇā as his successor by renaming him Angad, meaning my “own limb.” In fact, Guru Nanak’s decision to designate a successor was the most significant step in the development of early Sikh Panth. In Weber’s sense of the term, Guru Nanak created the “charisma of office” when he passed on his authority to his successor. He decided to promote Angad to the status of “Guru” within his own lifetime, and he bowed before his own successor, highlighting the fact that it was necessary for the charismatic authority to become radically changed. In this act of humility, and his assumption of the role of “disciple,” Guru Nanak was making a clear statement of the primacy of the “message” over the messenger. In so doing, he was asserting the objective independence of the power behind divine revelation, thus establishing the idea that the Guru is “one,” even if its expression takes several forms. A theory of spiritual succession was advanced in the form of “unity of the office of Guru,” in which there was no difference between the founder and the successors. They all represented the same light (*jot*), as a single flame ignites a series of torches. The idea that the revealed Word is to be assumed as an objective abstract – in no way a personal affect – had far-reaching implications in the development of the Sikh tradition, both in terms of the consolidation of authority and in terms of the evolving scriptural tradition (Singh 2006: 183).

Guru Angad (1504–1552)

The second Guru of the Sikhs was born as Laihnā on March 31, 1504, in the village of Harike in central Punjab. His father's name was Pheru and mother's name was Daya Kaur. He married Khīvī, the daughter of a Khatri of Khadur, who gave birth to a daughter, called Amro, and to two sons, named Dāsū and Dātū. While leading a village group on pilgrimage to Jawalamukhi, Laihnā encountered Guru Nanak near Kartarpur and decided to join the Sikh community there. Prior to his death in 1539, Guru Nanak bypassed either of his sons in designating Laihnā as his successor by renaming him Angad, preferring spiritual merit as the sole criterion of selection to any familial connection.

During his 13 years of spiritual reign Guru Angad composed only 62 *shaloks* (verses of two or more lines), throwing considerable light on the historical situation of the Sikh Panth and marking the doctrinal boundaries of the Sikh faith in strict conformity with the message of his predecessor, whom he described as “Guru” for the first time: “The disciples of ‘Guru Nanak’ do not require any further instruction” (GGS 150). In contrast to the worldview of the Hindu religious texts that stress the inexorable nature of the law of karma, the consequence of good and bad karma as heaven and hell, and the institutional discrimination based on caste and gender, Guru Angad claimed the exclusive status of the “nectar-like utterances” (*amrit bāṇī*) of Guru Nanak for delivering people from the shackles of karma and discriminatory aspects of the caste system through divine grace (GGS 1243). By stressing the inspired nature of the *bāṇī*, therefore, the second Guru laid down within doctrine the requirement of the compilation of Sikh scripture parallel to the Vedas (Hans 1988: 48). He added his own works to the *pothi* he received from his predecessor at the time of his succession.

Guru Angad established a new Sikh center at Khadūr because Guru Nanak's sons made the legal claim as the rightful heirs of his father's properties at Kartarpur. It confirmed an organizational principle that the communal establishment at Kartarpur could not be considered a unique institution but rather a model that could be cloned and imitated elsewhere. Guru Angad made early morning bathing obligatory for the practice of meditation on the divine Name and gave instructions to his followers in wrestling to build physical strength. He refined the Gurmukhi script for recording the compositions of the Gurus and popularized it among the common people. The institution of the community kitchen (*laṅgar*) was further strengthened at Khadūr, where it was most effectively run by Guru Angad's wife, Mata Khivi, who used to serve boiled rice in milk and butter to the congregation (GGS 967). Bhai Gurdas testifies that the second Guru appointed a storekeeper (*bhaṇḍārī*) and a chef (*rasoīyā*) for the purpose of looking after the needs of the growing Panth (VBG, 11: 14). Before his death, Guru Angad designated Amar Das as his successor to consolidate the ever-growing Sikh Panth.

Guru Amar Das (1479–1574)

The third Guru of the Sikhs was born on May 5, 1479. His father, Tej Bhan, and his mother, Bakht Kaur, lived in the village of Basarke (Gillan) in the Majha area of Punjab. They had four sons, the eldest of whom was Amar Das, who made a living partly in agriculture and partly in trade. In his early twenties, Amar Das married Mansa Devi, who bore him two sons, Mohan and Mohri, and two daughters, Dani and Bhani. As a pious Vaishnava, Amar Das used to go on a pilgrimage to the Ganga River every year. On returning for the twentieth time from the sacred river, he was prompted to search for a Guru by another devotee. One day, he happened to overhear the daughter of Guru Angad, Bibi Amro, who had married his brother's son, singing one of the captivating compositions of Guru Nanak. Upon his request, Bibi Amro took him to Khadur to pay respects to Guru

Nanak's successor, Guru Angad. There he became a Sikh and greatly impressed the second Guru with his devotion and selfless service (*sevā*). He was appointed to succeed him as the third Guru of the Sikh Panth on March 28, 1552, at the age of 73.

The teachings of Guru Amar Das are reflected in his 907 hymns he composed by drawing his inspiration from the 974 hymns of Guru Nanak. For him, the universal *bāṇī* exists perpetually through all ages, and the divine Word (*shabad*) is the underlying inspiration of the universal *bāṇī*, which together with the Guru is the instrument of liberation throughout the ages. Guru Amar Das maintains that Guru Nanak's *bāṇī* is the preeminent example of the universal *bāṇī*, which exists eternally through all ages. His celebrated *Anand* ("Bliss") in *Rāmakālī* mode commands a particular prominence in Sikh ritual and liturgy.

A major institutional development took place during the reign of Guru Amar Das, who introduced fresh measures to provide greater cohesion and unity to the ever-growing Panth. He founded the town of Goindval on the bank of the Beas River, where the three regions of the Punjab (Mājḥā, Doābā, and Mālṡā) meet. This may account for the spread of the Sikh Panth's influence in all three regions of the Punjab. Guru Amar Das created the institution of *mañjīs* ("Cots," seats of authority) for attracting new followers, each headed by men and women of good standing in the Sikh community and helping in the dissemination of the Guru's word in the distant communities. He expanded the scriptural tradition by preparing the Goindval Pothis, set the biannual festivals of Visākhī and Divālī that provided an opportunity for the growing community to get together and meet the Guru, and established the first pilgrimage center (*bāoli*) for socialization and attracting new followers. Under his patronage, his son-in-law Ram Das received training in the musical traditions of North India, and his nephew Gurdas Bhalla received his early education in Punjabi, Braj, and Persian languages, including Hindu and Muslim literary traditions at Sultanpur Lodhi. All these radical measures reflect the expansionist policy of the third Guru. In fact, this early move towards the establishment of a more comprehensive administrative system speaks of the rapidity with which the spiritual appeal of Guru Nanak was gaining ground and of the practicality of those to whom the tradition had been entrusted in dealing with this broadening appeal.

Proclaiming a parallel notion of sovereignty Guru Amar Das organized the Panth into 22 administrative units (*mañjīs*), reflecting the number of provinces into which the Mughal empire was divided. For the first time the third Guru mounted a "white flag" (*dhaṡal dhuṡā*) at the central place of Goindval, giving the message of peace and prosperity to his audience (GGS 1393). The geographical location of this new place was on the main route from Lahore to Delhi, and it soon became an economically flourishing town. It attracted the attention of passersby, including the Mughal authorities. Even the young Emperor Akbar (1542–1605) paid a visit to the Sikh court at Goindval out of curiosity, and he was told to partake the sacred food in the community kitchen before meeting with the Guru. A scriptural passage provides a contemporary reflection on this meeting: "Kings and emperors are all created by God; they all come and bow in reverence to God's humble servant" (GGS 305). During this "incidental visit" in 1571, Akbar offered a piece of revenue-free land to Guru Amar Das, who refused to accept the gift in keeping with the Sikh tradition of self-reliance. It was then given to the Guru's daughter, Bibi Bhani, implying that the revenue-free land went to her husband, Ram Das, who eventually succeeded the third Guru.

Before his death on September 1, 1574, Guru Amar Das made the decision to bequeath his spiritual leadership to his devoted son-in-law, Ram Das, passing over his two sons. Whereas Mohri accepted his father's decision and fell at the feet of Guru Ram Das (GGS 923), Mohan established his own parallel seat of authority at Goindval. Under these circumstances, the third Guru had already instructed his successor to create a new Sikh center. This was done in anticipation of opposition from his sons, who could lay a legal claim on the establishment of Goindval for themselves.

Guru Ram Das (1534–1581)

The fourth Guru's grandfather, Thakur Das, was a famous Khatri of Sodhi clan, living in Chūnā Maṇḍī subdivision of the city of Lahore. He was married to Jaswanti, who gave birth to a son called Hari Das. Hari Das married Anup Devi, who came to be known as Daya Kaur. After 12 years of married life, a son was born to them in the early morning hours of Thursday, September 24, 1534. He was named Ram Das but was generally known as Jeṭhā ("First-Born"). At age 7, he lost both his parents and was taken into care by his grandmother in her village Basarke, the ancestral village of the third Guru. Jeṭhā earned his living by selling boiled black chickpeas (*ghuṅgaṁṁān*) in the market square, frequently giving away his food to hungry people. As a young boy of 12, Jeṭhā traveled to Khadur with a company of devout Sikhs and later permanently settled at Goindval. Guru Amar Das and his wife, Mansa Devi, recognized his upright character and steadfast service and gave their daughter, Bibi Bhani, in marriage to him in December 1552. The couple chose to stay in Goindval to be near Guru Amar Das. They had three sons, Prithi Chand (b. 1558), Mahadev (b. 1560), and Arjan (b. 1563). Ram Das continued to serve the third Guru with utmost devotion and humility.

There is firm evidence that certain people living in the vicinity of Goindval complained against Guru Amar Das to the Lahore administration (GGS 306). The third Guru dispatched Ram Das to Lahore to meet with Emperor Akbar to answer grievances that Brahmins raised in the royal court. They raised objections against running a free community kitchen (*laṅgar*) at Goindval, abandoning the traditional religious and social customs, and ignoring distinctions of the four castes. Ram Das's simple answer that all are equal in the eyes of God pleased Akbar, who dismissed the accusations of the appellants (Bajwa 2004: 76–77). Guru Amar Das designated his son-in-law, Ram Das, as his successor before he passed away on September 1, 1574. According to the eyewitness account of Sundar: "All the Sikhs, relatives, children and companions fell at the feet of Ram Das in acknowledgment of his elevation to the office of the Guru" (GGS 923–924).

Assuming the office of leadership of the Sikh Panth, Guru Ram Das left Goindval to establish a new Sikh center. He laid the foundation of the new town in 1577, when he inaugurated the excavation of the large pool called Amritsar at the original site marked by the third Guru. The contemporary bard Kalsahār eulogized his contribution:

Guru Ram Das, the son of Thakur Hari Das, fills the empty pools to overflowing. The stream of ambrosial nectar [of the divine Name] flows to provide the immortal status to his disciples; the sacred pool is forever overflowing with ambrosial nectar.

(GGS 1396)

The devotees purified themselves with a dip in its sacred waters in such a way that this "physical reservoir built by Guru Ram Das became a symbol for the receptive human vessel which was filled with the elixir of the Guru's word" (Khalsa 1997: 71). The habitation that grew around the sacred pool came to be known as *Chakk Rām Dās* ("Ram Das's Village") or Ramdaspur ("Town of Ram Das"), significant because a settlement had been named after a Sikh Guru for the first time.

The founding of the city of Ramdaspur and the excavation of the large pool point towards mobilization of considerable resources by the fourth Guru. These projects required considerable financial and logistical mobilization for which the appointment of deputies (*masands*) became necessary to deal with complex administrative demands. By now, the Sikh Panth was equal to such an endeavor, confirming the point that the appeal of Guru Nanak's message had gained wider support and validation. The *masands* were required to collect voluntary offerings and other contributions from loyal Sikhs scattered throughout India and Afghanistan. They played comprehensive roles in

leading congregational worship, providing doctrinal guidance to their constituents, bringing new people to the Sikh fold, as well as serving the link between the local congregations and the center of the Sikh community.

The seven years of Guru Ram Das's spiritual reign contributed significantly to new developments within the Sikh Panth. He composed 679 hymns and expanded the range of musical *rāgas* or modes by adding 11 new ones, which were not used by the earlier Gurus. He was an accomplished musician who used to perform in classical *rāgas*. The musicality and emotional appeal of his hymns had tremendous impact on his audience. From his works, it is quite evident that his "sense of melody and rhythm place him according to the exalted standards of the Adi Granth, a feature of considerable importance" (McLeod 1997: 27). Guru Ram Das composed the wedding hymn *Lāvān* ("Circling") for the solemnization of Sikh marriage (GGS 773–774). For the first time he addressed the question: "Who is a Sikh?" (GGS 305–306), making the liturgical requirements of reciting and singing of the sacred Word an integral part of the very definition of being a Sikh. Before he passed away on September 1, 1581, Guru Ram Das designated his youngest son, Arjan, as his successor.

Guru Arjan (1563–1606)

The first Guru to be born in a Sikh household was Arjan, who saw the light of the day on April 15, 1563, at Goindval during the reign of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), thereby growing up in a period of relative peace and prosperity. His father was Guru Ram Das, a Sodhi Khatri living in the town of Goindval at the time, and his mother was Bibi Bhani, the daughter of the third Guru, Amar Das. As a Khatri boy, Arjan learned several languages and scripts – Gurmukhi from Bābā Buḍḍhā, Sanskrit from *paṇḍits* (learned Brahmins) Keso and Gopal, and Persian from local Muslim school (Singh 2007: 39). The experience of the first 11 formative years spent at Goindval in the presence of his maternal grandfather, Guru Amar Das, became an integral part of Arjan's memory, shaping his perceptions and choices in the future.

When Guru Ram Das left Goindval to establish the new Sikh center at Ramdaspur along with his family in 1574, his loyal disciples followed him. Here, Guru Arjan received training in classical *rāgas* ("melodies") from both resident and visiting musicians. At the age of 16, he married Ganga Devi in 1579. Following the Punjabi cultural traditions of *mukhlāvā*, the bride came from her parents' home to stay with her husband after a few years. His father sent Arjan to Lahore for the next two years to set up morning and evening patterns of Sikh worship among the congregations. He frequently visited Sufi centers, where he met Sāīn Mīr Mohammad (1550–1635) of the Qadiri order, popularly known as Mīyān Mīr in the Sikh tradition. The memory of this interaction led to his description of the four mystic stages of *sharīat* ("law"), *tarīqat* ("order"), *mā'rifat* ("gnosis"), and *haqīqat* ("truth") on the Sufi path of love in his compositions (GGS 1083). The vibrant atmosphere of Lahore provided Arjan with the opportunity to interact with people of different faiths and to test the veracity of his own ideas in religious dialogues. It broadened his awareness of the contemporary world, a fact that is luminously reflected in his works (Singh 2017: 27–28).

Guru Ram Das chose Arjan to succeed him before he died in 1581. The beginning of his spiritual reign was, however, marked by determined enmity from his eldest brother, Prithi Chand, who openly challenged his right to succeed their father. Prithi Chand even approached the local Mughal administrators for support, but he had to remain content with a share in the income from Ramdaspur. Guru Arjan inherited a vibrant community that had rather quickly developed around the model and tenets of Guru Nanak. He played an extremely important role in the process of crystallization of the Sikh tradition. He composed 2,218 hymns, which makes him by far the largest contributor to the Sikh scripture. His *Sukhmanī* ("Pearl of Peace," GGS 262–296) is a masterpiece

of his literary genius. It is a work of supreme lyricism, extolling the beauty of the divine Name (*nām*) as the only means of liberation from suffering. Its communal recitation is immensely popular among Sikhs and Hindus alike.

Guru Arjan's 25 years of reign was marked by several far-reaching institutional developments. First, the construction of the Darbar Sahib (present-day "Golden Temple") amidst the sacred pool of Amritsar was the momentous achievement of his building program. It acquired prominence as the central place of Sikh worship. Second, Guru Arjan inherited a rich and substantial scriptural corpus that he took upon himself to systematize and organize into what became the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the key marker of Sikh identity for generations to come. The making of Sikh scripture was a massive editorial undertaking, which ended in the production of the *Ādi Granth* ("Original Book") in 1604. Third, the installation of the Sikh scripture in the Darbar Sahib in 1604 enhanced its centrality in Sikh life. As a result, the city of Ramdasapur emerged as a new "power center" in its own right. Fourth, by the end of sixteenth century the Sikh Panth had developed a strong sense of independent identity, which is quite evident from Guru Arjan's assertion, "We are neither Hindu nor Musalman" (GGS 1136). Fifth, Guru Arjan founded three new towns such as Tarn Taran and Sri Hargobindpur in the Bari Doab and Kartarpur in the Bist Jalandhar Doab, attracting the urban poor and rural peasantry to join the Sikh fold in large numbers. Sixth, the Guru encouraged his Sikhs to participate in the trade of horses to ameliorate their economic condition. Finally, in an early painting Guru Arjan is portrayed in the Mughal style, holding a hunting hawk on his hand. In those days a hawk was regarded as the symbol of royalty. These developments clearly indicate that the "office of Guru" provided both spiritual and temporal authority.

Guru Arjan developed the city of Ramdasapur to such an extent that the reality of a divine kingdom became unmistakable in his proclamation: "There is no other place like the beautiful and thickly populated Ramdasapur. The divine rule prevails in Ramdasapur due to the grace of the Guru. No tax (*jīz̄ya*) is levied, nor any fine; there is no collector of taxes" (GGS 430 and 817). The administration of the town was evidently in the hands of Guru Arjan. In a certain sense, Ramdasapur was an autonomous town in the context and framework of the Mughal rule of Emperor Akbar. In a particularly striking composition, Guru Arjan claims to have established the rule of justice and humility (*haleṁī rāj*) in the town of Ramdasapur: "The merciful Lord has now ordained a commandment that none shall be domineering over others. All shall abide in peace, prosperity, and justice. This way the rule of justice and humility is established on earth" (GGS 74). As an ideal, divine rule transcends and makes a judgement on human rule. Discourse about rule is always centered on power and privilege and on the rights and duties of those who have it. It involves a process much more than a place, a way of life much more than a location on territory. Thus, Guru Arjan's idea of divine rule was related to an ethical way of life based on the principles of truth, social justice, and humility taught by Guru Nanak.

The author of *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* ("The School of Religions"), a mid-seventeenth-century Persian text attests that by "the reign of Guru Arjan Mal, [the Sikhs] became very numerous. Not many cities remained in the inhabited region, where the Sikhs had not settled in some number" (Grewal and Habib 2001: 65). The same author provides us with an important insight into the regular system of voluntary offerings collected by the *masands*, the Guru's deputies. He does so from purely an economic angle by comparing these contributions of loyal Sikhs, *bhet* ("offering") and *nazar* ("gift"), with the *bāj* ("tribute") levied by the Mughal rule, explicitly claiming that *masands* were more successful in collecting voluntary offerings from the Sikhs than the Mughal officials in their effort to collect tax from their subjects. Later historians seized upon this idea to suggest political motives in the religious work of the Sikh Gurus. They claimed that during the reign of Guru Arjan, the socioreligious community (Panth) of Guru Nanak's followers had become a state within the Mughal empire, with far-flung congregations linked with the Guru through the *masands* who

created financial autonomy of the whole organization. Equally important was the local autonomy of Ramdasapur, which was not merely a place of pilgrimage but also a self-governing town without any financial or administrative link with the Mughal empire.

The growing strength of the Sikh movement attracted an unfavorable attention of the ruling authorities. There is firm evidence in the compositions of Guru Arjan that a series of complaints were made against him to the functionaries of the Mughal state, giving them an excuse to watch the activities of the Sikhs. On November 4, 1598, Emperor Akbar officially visited the Sikh court at Goindval. He was genuinely impressed with what he saw at Goindval and gave his explicit approval to the work done by Guru Arjan. At the Guru's instance, Akbar remitted the annual revenue of the peasants of the district who had been hit hard by the failure of the monsoon. As a result of tax remission, Guru Arjan's popularity skyrocketed in the rural peasantry of the Punjab. The liberal policy of Emperor Akbar sheltered Guru Arjan and his followers for a while, but it could not remove the nefarious designs of the Guru's enemies for good. Within eight months of Akbar's death in October 1605, Guru Arjan was tortured to death on May 30, 1606, by the orders of the new emperor, Jahangir (r. 1605–1627), crippling the rapidly growing Sikh movement. Guru Arjan's martyrdom not only signaled the end of Akbar's policy of religious pluralism but also marked the beginning of a transformation in the religious and cultural landscape of Mughal India.

Guru Hargobind (1590–1644)

As the only son of Guru Arjan and Mata Ganga, Hargobind was born on June 19, 1590, at Gurū Kī Vaḍālī near Amritsar. As a child he escaped being poisoned by a Brahmin servant instigated by his jealous uncle, Prithī Chand, and survived a virulent attack of smallpox – the two incidents being mentioned in the compositions of Guru Arjan. He grew up into a tall and handsome youth and received his early educations at the hands of two revered Sikhs – Bhāī Gurdās and Bābā Buḍḍhā – the former teaching him the religious texts and the latter the martial arts of swordsmanship and archery. He was 16 years old when his father was executed in Lahore on May 30, 1606. The end of Guru Arjan's life was not really the end; his death empowered his followers to stand more boldly for the ideals of truth, justice, and fearlessness.

A radical reshaping of the Sikh Panth took place after Guru Arjan's martyrdom. His successor, Guru Hargobind, signaled the formal process when he donned two swords symbolizing the spiritual (*pīrī*) and the temporal (*mīrī*) investiture. The inscriptions on these two swords preserved at the *Toshākhānā* at Amritsar are instructive: the phrase *pātashāhī chhevīn pīrī* ("Spiritual authority of the sixth King") appear on the sword of spiritual authority (*pīrī tegh*), while the wording *amal-e-pātashāh-mīrī* ("Temporal authority of the sovereign King") appear on the sword of temporal authority (*mīrī tegh*). Also, Guru Hargobind built the *Akāl Takhat* ("Eternal Throne") facing the Darbār Sāhib, representing the newly assumed role of temporal authority. Under his direct leadership, the Sikh Panth took up arms to protect itself from Mughal hostility. According to Bhāī Gurdās, this new martial response was like "hedging the orchard of the Sikh faith with the hardy and thorny *kikkar* tree" (VBG, 25:25). It was meant to achieve a balance between temporal and spiritual concerns as propagated by Guru Nanak. After four skirmishes with Mughal troops, Guru Hargobind strategically withdrew with his retinue to Kiratpur in 1635 at the edge of Shivalik Hills in the Hindur territory of a vassal beyond the jurisdiction of Mughal Empire.

Guru Hargobind had six children – five sons and a daughter, as follows: Gurdita, Ani Rai, and the daughter, Bibi Viro, were born to Mata Damodari; Suraj Mal and Atal Rai to Mata Marvahi; and Tegh Bahadur to Mata Nanaki. Three of his sons, Baba Gurdita, Atal Rai, and Ani Rai died in his lifetime. It is important to note that Guru Hargobind designated his grandson Har Rai

(1630–1661), Baba Gurdita's younger son, as his successor before he passed away on March 3, 1644, at Kiratpur. This was consciously done in response to Mughal interference in Sikh affairs because Dhir Mal, Baba Gurdita's elder son, had already established a parallel seat of authority at Kartarpur in Jalandhar District with the help of a revenue-free grant given to him by Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1627–1658) on November 29, 1643. With the original Kartarpur Pothi (1604) in his possession, Dhir Mal laid claim to the office of Guru. Unsurprisingly, the Mughal emperor had thought of bringing the Sikhs under control by supporting the claims of Dhir Mal and his followers. The mainline Sikh tradition, however, continued to honor the decision of Guru Hargobind.

Guru Har Rai (1630–1661)

The seventh Guru of the Sikhs was the son of Bābā Gurditā and Mātā Bāssī and grandson of Guru Hargobind. He was born on January 16, 1630, at Kīratpur. In 1640 he was married to Sulakhaṇī. When Gurū Hargobind designated him to the office of Guru before he died in 1644, Gurū Har Rāi withdrew from Kīratpur further back into the Shivalik Hills to avoid an armed conflict between the chief of Hindur (Nalagarh) and Mughal commandants who invaded his territory and settled with a small retinue at Thapal Derā in the territory of Sirmor (Nahan).

At the time of succession to the throne, the seventh Guru proclaimed his first teaching in the form of a *vāk* or commandment in the written form, assuring his followers to keep their hope of succor focused only on the One Lord. He frequently visited the Malwa region of the Punjab for the purpose of preaching, and on one such occasion he brought into the fold of Sikhī, a person named Phūl, progenitor of the leaders of Phulkian misl and of the princely families of Malwa. He had favorable relationship with Dara Shikoh, who sought the Guru's help while he was fleeing in front of the army of his younger brother Aurangzeb, after his defeat in the battle of Samugarh on March 29, 1658. Gurū Har Rāi deployed his own troops at the ferry at Goindvāl to delay Aurangzeb's army, which was pursuing Dara Shikoh at his heels. When Aurangzeb won the Mughal throne, he summoned Gurū Har Rāi to Delhi in 1661 to explain his conduct. The Guru sent instead his elder son Rām Rāi, who sought to ingratiate himself with Aurangzeb by claiming that a line from the Ādi Granth to which the emperor had raised an objection had been mis-transcribed.

When the seventh Guru came to know about his son's moral lapse, he immediately banished Rām Rāi (d. 1687), who became a Mughal courtier and retired to Dehra Dun. Guru Har Rai designated his younger son, Har Krishan, to be his successor before he passed away at Kiratpur on October 6, 1661. This decision was a direct challenge to Emperor Aurangzeb, who had kept Rām Rāi as hostage in Delhi on the assumption that he would be the heir apparent of Gurū Har Rāi and could be manipulated into bringing the Sikhs under control.

Guru Har Krishan (1656–1664)

Har Krishan was the eighth Guru of the Sikhs who assumed the title of Guru at the tender age of 5. He was born on July 7, 1656, at Kiratpur and was the youngest son of Gurū Har Rāi and Mātā Sulakhaṇī. His elder brother, Rām Rāi, had offended his father through his sycophantic dealings with the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and was accordingly passed over in 1661, when Gurū Har Rāi designated Har Krishan to be his successor.

Ram Rai approached Aurangzeb to seek redress for the injustice done to him by his father. The emperor summoned the young Guru to Delhi through Raja Jai Singh of Amber. Accompanied by his grandmother (Mātā Bāssī) and his mother (Mātā Sulakhaṇī), Gurū Har Krishan left for Delhi, instructing his disciples who came to call on him *en route*. He stayed at Raja Jai Singh's bungalow

(*banglā*), where present-day Gurdwārā Baṅglā Sāhib is situated. There are some anecdotes about Raja Jai Singh's concealed attempts to authenticate the young Guru's spiritual powers at the bidding of Emperor Aurangzeb. The Guru was fully aware how his father had banished his elder brother, Ram Rai, for misreading a scriptural verse and for showing miraculous feats in the Mughal court. Anticipating that the emperor would insist that he demonstrate miraculous feats, the Guru refused to meet with him in person. Meanwhile, an epidemic of smallpox was raging in the city of Delhi, and the Guru came out of Raja Jai Singh's bungalow to tend the sick.

During the service of healing the sick, Guru Har Krishan was himself afflicted with the disease of smallpox, which ravaged his tender body. He made the pronouncement of designating his successor as "Bābā Bakālē," meaning that the next Guru would be found in the town of Bakala. He was specifically referring to his great-uncle, Tegh Bahadur (youngest son of Guru Hargobind), who lived at the town of Bakala at that time. Guru Har Krishan passed away on March 30, 1664.

Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675)

Tegh Bahadur ("Brave Swordsman"), the ninth Guru of the Sikhs and the youngest of the five sons of Guru Hargobind, was born on April 1, 1621, at Amritsar. His mother, Mātā Nānakī, belonged to the village of Bakālā. He spent his early years in Amritsar, receiving training in religious texts and martial arts under the care of Bhāi Gurdās and Bābā Buḍḍhā respectively. On February 4, 1633, he married Gūjarī, but only after 33 years of marriage the couple had their only child, Gobind Rāi, who became the tenth Guru. He participated in the Kartārpur skirmish against the Mughal troops, fighting valiantly alongside his father.

After the death of Gurū Hargobind in 1644 at Kīratpur, he moved to his mother's village, Bakālā, where he spent much of his time in meditation on the divine Name (*nām simaran*). His contemplative nature and mystical temperament found expression in his 115 works included in the final version of the *Adi Granth*. He became the ninth Guru when his predecessor, the child Guru Har Krishan, uttered the words "Bābā Bakālē" (the great-uncle who is in Bākālā) just before his death in 1664. After assuming the office of Guru, he encountered opposition from his nephew Dhīr Mal in neighboring Kartārpur (Jalandhar) and from another relative, the Mīṇā leader Harijī, in Amritsar. Leaving the plains, he shifted to Kīratpur, where his presence was unwelcoming to his half-brother Sūraj Mal.

On May 13, 1665, Gurū Tegh Bahādur went to Bilaspur in Kahlur state, farther up in the hills to mourn the death of Rāja Dīp Chand, the ruler of the state. His widow, Dowager Rāṇī Champā of Bilaspur, offered to give the Guru a piece of land in her state, which the Guru bought on payment of 500 rupees. There he built on the mound of Mākhawāl, a new town that became famous as Anandpur. Thereafter, the Guru departed on an extended journey to the east of India, where in Patna, his only son, Gobind Rāi, was born on December 22, 1666. The surviving *hukam-nāmās* ("Letters"), which he wrote to the various Sikh congregations along the way, reveal that the Guru was received with great enthusiasm.

Returning to Anandpur, he intensified his preaching in the plains of Malwa area, visiting those Sikh families who had remained loyal to the mainline Sikh tradition. The Guru encouraged his followers to be fearless in their pursuit of a just society: "He who holds none in fear, nor is afraid of anyone, is acknowledged as a man of true wisdom" (GGs 1427). In doing so, Guru Tegh Bahadur posed a direct challenge to Emperor Aurangzeb, who had imposed Islamic laws and taxes on non-Muslims. According to an earliest narrative, when a group of Hindu *pandits* ("scholars") from Kashmir asked for the Guru's help against Aurangzeb's oppressive measures, he agreed to do whatever was necessary to defend their rights to wear their "sacred threads and frontal marks" (DG 70). The Guru was summoned to Delhi by the Mughal authorities, and when he refused to abandon

his faith, he was publicly executed on November 11, 1675. Before his departure to Delhi, he had already appointed his 9-year-old son, Gobind Rai, to the office of Guru.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708)

Gobind Singh was the tenth and last personal Guru of the Sikhs. He was born as Gobind Rai in Patnā on December 22, 1666, the only child of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Mātā Gūjarī. At the age of five, he was brought to Anandpur in the Shivalik area, where he received his education in Sanskrit and Persian, acquiring the arts of poetry and warfare. In 1675 his father was publicly executed in Delhi by the orders of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) for refusing to perform a miracle or to accept Islam, thereby protecting the freedom of conscience. Gobind Rai was formally installed Guru on the *Visākhī* day of 1676.

Much of Guru Gobind Singh's creative literary work was done at Pāonṭā, a small town he founded on the banks of the River Jamunā in 1685, where he composed *Jāp Sāhib* and *Akāl Ustat*. He won his first battle at Bhaṅgāṇī in 1688 against Fateh Shāh, the ruler of Garhwal, who attacked him unprovoked. The Guru returned to Anandpur, where he grew to maturity as the ruler of a small Shivalik state. He participated in wars only when other chieftains of the hills attacked him to curb his growing influence.

On *Visākhī* Day 1699, Gurū Gobind Singh restructured the Sikh Panth and instituted the *Khālsā* ("Pure"), an order of loyal Sikhs bound by common identity and discipline. The "Cherished Five" (*pañj piārē*), who were the first to respond to his call for volunteers, became the nucleus of the new order. The Guru initiated them through a ceremony that involved sweetened water (*amrit*) stirred with a double-edged sword and sanctified by the recitation of five liturgical prayers (*pañj bāṇīān*). The Cherished Five, in turn, administered the *amrit* to the Guru himself, after which thousands of Sikhs joined the order that day. The creation of the Khalsa alarmed the Shivalik chieftains and the Mughal governor of Sirhind. Their combined forces attacked the Guru in Anandpur. In 1704 the Guru was compelled to evacuate his fort, losing two of his elder sons in the battle at Chamkaur. His two younger sons were cruelly executed later in Sirhind by being bricked up alive.

The Guru wrote *Zafar-nāmā* ("Epistle of Victory") to Aurangzeb on his way to southern Punjab, where he inflicted a defeat on his pursuers at Muktsar. Having some relief from war, he stayed at Damdamā Sāhib, preoccupied with the preparation of the final version of the *Ādi Granth*. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Guru agreed to accompany his successor, Bahadur Shah, to the south. An agent of the Mughal governor of Sirhind assassinated the Guru in 1708 at Nander. Sikh Panth's collective memory of Guru Gobind Singh is of a regal figure in richly ornamented garments, as he is depicted in available paintings. He was an able spiritual and political leader who maintained a court at Anandpur and who led an army of spiritual warriors to fight against tyranny and injustice. He is the supreme exemplar of all that a Khalsa Sikh should be. Before he passed away, he terminated the line of personal Gurus and installed the *Adi Granth* as the eternal Guru for Sikhs, giving another title for the Sikh scripture as "the Guru Granth Sahib" and authorized the collected body of the Khalsa to take any decision in the light of its teachings to guide the community.

Internal Conflict within the Panth and External Interference from Mughals

The social constituency of the Panth was far from being homogenous. Diverse groups from both urban and rural backgrounds comprised the Panth. While the urban Sikhs had taken Sikhism beyond Punjab in the major cities of India and Afghanistan, the rural headquarters of the Gurus attracted the

local population within the fold of Sikhism. Sikh community self-consciousness was further heightened by the in-group conflict created by dissenters and slanderers. This internal conflict began when Guru Nanak passed over his sons and designated his disciple as his successor. His elder son became the founder of a sect of *Udāsīs* (“ascetics”) who acknowledged the lineage of the ten Sikh Gurus, but they gave more importance to the chain of succession from Guru Nanak, through his celibate son, Sirī Chand. Although they show greater respect to *Gurbānī*, they interpret its essential message in Vedantic terms, shifting the emphasis from a personal and loving *Vāhigurū* to an impersonal reality. Guru Hargobind brought the Udāsīs closer to the mainstream Sikh tradition by giving his elder son, Baba Gurdita, to long-lived Sirī Chand to lead the Udasi sect.

The author of *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* (1640s) claims that after the death of Guru Arjan, his elder brother Pirthā (Prithī Chand) sat in his place, and that his successor in 1645–1646 was Harijī. His followers called themselves *bhagats* (“devotees”), but the Sikhs of Guru Hargobind called them *Mīnās* (“scoundrels”), which was a derogatory term (Grewal and Habib 2001: 67–68). For Bhai Gurdas, Guru Hargobind is the true king; the *Mīnās* are “rebels,” and the rebels have no place in the realm of the king (*VBG*, 34:21; 24–25; 38:20). In his *hukam-nāmā* (“letter”), Guru Hargobind employed the term “Khalsa” for the mainstream Sikhs who were directly initiated by the Guru. They stood apart from the second category of *melīs* and *sahlaṅgs* initiated by the *masands*, whose primary loyalty was to the latter. The third category belonged to the followers of Prithī Chand and his successors (Miharvān and Harijī), who had virtually nothing to do with Guru Hargobind (Grewal 2017: 35).

Two more dissident groups arose after Guru Hargobind passed away in March 1644. First, his elder grandson, Dhīr Mal, established an independent seat of authority at Kartarpur with a grant of revenue-free land offered by Emperor Shah Jahan. His followers came to be known as Dhīrmālīs. Second, Emperor Aurangzeb patronized Rām Rāi (Guru Har Rai’s elder son) with a grant of revenue-free land at Dehra Dun. His followers were known as Rām Rāiyās. All these dissident groups were created by Mughal authorities who were interfering in Sikh affairs to control the Panth. While the mainstream Sikhs were in confrontation with the Mughal emperors, the three dissident groups were reconciled to the Mughal state and accepted its patronage (Grewal 2017: 36).

If the Sikh Panth was not homogenous in terms of its social constituency, then it was not free from conflict either. There were two kinds of conflicts, both internal and external, playing a dynamic role within the ranks of the Panth. The detractors of the Guru created an internal conflict through their slanderous activities. Their rivalry was heightened when Guru Arjan was designated for the throne of Guru Nanak in preference to his eldest brother, Prithi Chand. The successful resisting of the challenge posed by Prithī Chand and his followers (*Mīnās*) involved a heightened loyalty on the part of those who adhered to the orthodox line (McLeod 2000: 55). The conflict created within the Sikh Panth by dissidents originally worked to counter and then, paradoxically, to enhance the process of crystallization of the Sikh tradition. Further, the external conflict was introduced within the Panth when a series of complaints were made against Guru Arjan to the functionaries of the Mughal state, giving them an excuse to watch the activities of the Sikhs. The Mughal authorities were seriously concerned about the growing strength of the Sikh movement. Both internal and external pressures on the Sikh Panth were largely responsible for the consolidation of the Sikh tradition.

Legacy of the Authority of the Guru

The creation of the Khalsa by the tenth Guru was unique in two senses: first, it invited all Sikhs to join the Order of the Khalsa regardless of their background, and second, it had a coherent vision of political sovereignty. All Sikhs were encouraged to become spiritual warriors of righteousness

(*dharam*) engaged in a struggle against tyranny, social injustice, and economic exploitation. They were infused with a new spirit to help the weak and confront the powerful. They were further inspired to establish the sovereign rule of the Khalsa. Guru Nanak's fundamental message of cultivating in life the values of human equality, self-respect, justice for all, human dignity, and fearlessness found its practical expression in the lived experience of the Khalsa.

Guru Gobind Singh not only abolished the institution of *masands* to control its disruptive activities but also removed the threat of dissident groups when he declared that the Khalsa should have no dealings with the followers of Prithī Chand, Dhīr Mal, and Rām Rāi. Indeed, abandoning the five reprobate groups (*pañj mel*) led to the "greater awareness of boundaries and a heightened consciousness of identity" (Grewal 1997: 30). Further, he placed the spiritual and temporal authority (*jāmā*) within the collective body of the Khalsa, emphasizing the corporate sovereignty of the Sikh Panth. He terminated the line of personal Gurus and installed the Adi Granth as the eternal Guru for the Sikhs. Thereafter, the authority of the Guru was invested both in the scripture (Guru Granth) and the corporate community (Guru Panth), providing guidance to the Sikhs for all times to come.

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2

GURU, ŚABAD, AND KHALSA

Exploring Conceptual Intersections

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair

Introduction

When people think of “Guru” traditions from India, Sikhism often comes to mind. It would not be entirely wrong to call it a “Guru” tradition par excellence, not least because it had ten living or personal Gurus as well as an authoritative scripture called the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Moreover, the term “Guru” is quite possibly the most prevalent in the Sikh conceptual lexicon, giving rise to such terms as *gurmat* (the logic or philosophy of the Guru), *gurprasād* (by the Guru’s grace), *gurbāṇī* (the utterance of the Guru), *gurdarśan* (the Guru’s Vision), to name but a few. One might therefore conclude, as the scholar of Sikhism W. Owen Cole has done, that Sikhism, with its prevalence of personal gurus within the wider Sikh Panth (community) in the form of Baba-sects, *dera*-Babas, Sants, and related sectarian figures, is just like any other of the many Indian Guru-traditions. For Cole, it is to “Indian religious tradition that we must turn in our attempt to understand the major distinct concept of Sikhism, that of guruship” (Cole 1982: 1). Indeed, as Cole states, “although India has seen the emergence of many guru cults in its long history” and although “[m]any have disappeared soon after the death of the preceptor” such that the “guru becomes lost to memory save for a *samadhi*, a tomb or memorial shrine,” evidently this is not the case for Sikhism, which “may be regarded as a gurucult which has persisted and in doing so made a distinctive contribution to the concept of guru in the Indian religious tradition” (Cole 1982: 2). Although Cole was not incorrect to emphasize the “distinctive contribution to the concept of guru,” his categorization of Sikhism as a “gurucult,” albeit one with greater longevity than others, is an oversimplification, as is the suggestion that its notion of Guruship can be unproblematically fixed into “Indian religious tradition.” If we carefully probe the meaning and implications of the concepts of Guru and Guruship in Sikh literature and its early history, what emerges is both surprising and in a way somewhat un-Indian. The term Guru, especially when linked to the term *śabad* (for example, as *śabad-guru* [the Guru as Word or Word as Guru]) refers less to a person than to an incorporeal concept that radically undermines all vestiges of personhood.

In this chapter I show how *śabad-guru* is not only one of the conceptual building blocks of any Sikh philosophy. It is also rooted in an evolving phenomenology, which starts out (during their lifetimes) with the Gurus communicating authority according to the Indic tradition of oral mediation; from here mediation of authority transitions from a living person to a sacred text in conjunction

with a living person; from here it transitions further to a sacred text in conjunction with a community *minus* a living personal Guru, culminating in a situation today where the figure of Guru is dispersed between sacred text, community, and digital forms of media (digital text, sound, in multiple languages) and available in on laptop, tablet, and smartphone (Mandair 2019). At all times during its evolution, the form of mediation is itself accompanied and underpinned by a philosophical concept – the notion of incorporeal Word (*anhad śabad*). It is the Word's incorporeal nature that pushes the relation between Guru and Sikh towards a state of absolute depersonalized, formless, non-mediation (or immediacy) characteristic of pure consciousness.

Needless to say, this movement from mediation to immediacy has potentially important ramifications for the way in which political authority and sovereignty are conceived within and outside the Sikh community. By depersonalizing the tendency to vest authority in living gurus, the concept of *śabad-guru* complicates the notion of spiritual-political authority in ways that not only place it at odds with an “Indian religious tradition” that privileges personalized Guruship but also presents a philosophical challenge for mainstream Khalsa Sikhism. For even as the latter enshrines *śabad-guru* as its central doctrine, the very human tendency to iconize this doctrine, rather than to examine it philosophically for its salvific potential, inadvertently proliferates a fault line within the popular Sikhism's understanding of authority that has been exploited by “gurucults” such as the dera-Babas on the one hand and on the other hand by political organizations vying for votes.

The implications of equating *śabad* with *guru* raises important questions. How does this concept sit with the community's collective memory and practice that retains an emotional link to a personal Guru? In what way does the tension between the mediational and the philosophical aspects of *śabad-guru* create one of the fault lines between mainstream Sikhism (Khalsa tradition) and the popular tradition of paying reverence to the so-called “Baba” sects such as the Radhaswamis, Nirankaris, Namdharis, and contemporary Sant-based groups? Can the concept of *śabad-guru* transform notions of sovereignty especially in the diaspora, as loyalty comes to be invested in a geographically non-locatable, non-historical principle? Due to constraints of space, this chapter does address the question around personal gurus or Baba-sects for it is explored in greater detail in a sister-essay to this one (Mandair 2023). Here I focus mainly on the doctrine of *śabad-as-Guru*.

Contesting Narratives of Guruship

Students and many scholars encountering Sikhism for the first time are often struck by the ubiquity of the term “Guru” both as a figure and as a concept, in the phenomenology of Sikh ritual process, its way of life, its literature, as well as its philosophical teachings. This is hardly surprising given that historically there was a continuous succession of ten living Gurus starting with the founder Nanak and ending with the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, who ended the formal line of personal or living Guruship, known as *gurgaddi*, shortly before his death in 1708. Instead of nominating a living (*dehdhari*) Guru as his successor, he nominated the Sikh scripture (Adi Granth) as the eternal guide of the Sikhs in conjunction with a minimal community of five Sikhs initiated into the order of the Khalsa (a spiritual-political order established by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699).

As historians have long noted, the nomination of a successor was often a contested issue with rival claimants to the *gurgaddi* either being marginalized, setting up their own sectarian bases, or in certain cases colluding with powerful State forces to help undermine the authority of the chosen leader of the Sikhs (McLeod 1997; Grewal 2009). Not surprisingly, refusal to compromise on the part of overlooked claimants at times led to schisms within the early Sikh community. This became something of a pattern especially after the fifth Guru, Arjan, was selected in place of his elder brother, Prithi Chand, as the historian W.H. McLeod has noted:

As a result, Arjan had to face the disappointed and determined enmity of his eldest brother, Prithi Chand, and quarrels over the succession became a feature of the remainder of the Guru period. At least three of these disappointed contenders formed panths of their own, claiming to be the legitimate descendants from Nanak.

(p. 29)

For years his opposition proved a great difficulty for Guru Arjan particularly after Arjan's son was born, when Prithi Chand seems to have attempted something serious in the hope of undermining the child's claims to succession. There is for this particular episode sound evidence which indicates that Prithi Chand was contemplating serious hurt (possibly actual assassination) to Arjan's only child, the future Guru Hargobind. As proof we have the testimony of both Guru Arjan and Bhai Gurdas. Prithi Chand, having failed in his attempt, set himself up as a rival Guru. To the followers of the legitimate line, they were the Minas or "scoundrels."

(McLeod 1997: 30)

Having learned from this episode and anticipating future schisms and hostilities from external forces such as the Mughal Sultanate, which was undergoing its own wars of succession, Guru Arjan took steps to consolidate and diversify the nature of authority within the community, which till then centered around the figure of the living Guru. Arguably the most important step was the compilation of a scripture (Adi Granth) containing the compositions of his predecessor Gurus. Hymns contributed to the Adi Granth by six of the Sikh Gurus (Nanak, Angad, Amardas, Ramdas, Arjan, and Tegh Bahadur) not only carried the authorizing stamp of the name "Nanak" (each Guru signed in the name of "Nanak") but respective Sikh Gurus could be distinguished by the code-word *mohalla* (lit "house" or "neighborhood") but abbreviated to "M" within the text of the Adi Granth. These Gurus therefore signed off as M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M9 (Shackle and Mandair 2005: xviii). The key point here is that the designation "M" referred not only to the *bodily identity* of each Guru but to house or neighborhood, which can also be seen as a metaphorical reference to the nature of a *sovereign consciousness* that was shared by each individual Guru in order to be recognized as legitimate occupant of the *gurgaddi*. Thus, to be officially nominated as "Guru" by the incumbent master, the initiate had to manifest evidence of being possessed by this consciousness, which in turn could only be verified by the master through specific tests, the important of which was the new Guru's ability to channel the revelation of *gurbani*. I use the word "revelation" with some caution here, for I want to underscore that it does not necessarily correspond to the Abrahamic notion of revelation as the literal speaking of God's Word to man either directly or through the agency of supernatural beings such as angels. Revelation in Guru Nanak's philosophy is intrinsically tied to the role of *śabad* as the non-anthropomorphic agent of spiritual self-realization. As a matter of fact, *śabad* is the non-human agent of revelation (Mandair 2022c: 63).

A second step implemented by Guru Arjan was to formally install the Adi Granth in the newly constructed Harimandir, which thenceforward became the central pilgrimage site for the Sikh community. During the installation, Arjan publicly prostrated himself before the Adi Granth and placed the scripture on a podium higher than his own sitting position, in effect treating it as if it were his Guru. The message to his followers (and to his detractors within and outside the community) was unambiguous: spiritual authority lay not only with the person of the living Guru but, from now on, with the Adi Granth; not only with the corporeal text but even more importantly with the incorporeal teaching contained within its verses. This practice was continued by the later Gurus (Hargobind, Har Rai, Harkrishen, and Tegh Bahadur) until the last days of Guru Gobind

Singh, who formally ended the line of living Gurus by transferring Guruship jointly on the text, which was renamed the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and to the community with the proviso that it was to be led by the Khalsa. To quote McLeod again:

Before he died, realizing his end was near the Guru summoned his Sikhs and declared that the line of personal Gurus was now at an end. Thereafter they should regard the functions of the Guru as vested in the Granth (which became the Guru Granth) and the Panth (the Guru Panth). In this way the Guru will remain ever-present and ever accessible to his Sikhs. . . . The line of personal Gurus was at an end and the Guru would thereafter be present in the Granth and the Panth.

(McLeod 1997: 38)

This brief foray into early Sikh tradition shows us that the figure of the Guru, and along with it the concept of Guruship, was intimately tied to issues of sovereignty and authority. Indeed, the question of sovereignty is central to the various scenes of nomination that resulted in the investiture of a living personal Guru from the late fifteenth century to 1708, or investiture of the scriptural text as Guru parallel to the living Guru (1603), or the investiture of the Adi Granth as Guru in 1708, and of course the designation of the Khalsa's right to lead the community. What is often forgotten (at times by Sikh traditionalists themselves) is that the primary reason for creating the Khalsa was not so much to create an external identity where one did not exist, or to formalize a new spiritual-political-order. The primary *raison d'être* of Khalsa was (and remains) to conserve the teaching of the house of Guru Nanak, whose foundational principle is the sovereign consciousness passed from one living Guru to another and enshrined within the text as a philosophico-spiritual principle of liberation: *śabad-guru* – the idea that Guru is Word. As a doctrine, *śabad-guru* incorporates two seemingly contradictory functions. On the one hand it mediates between (1) Guru Nanak and the materiality of the Adi Granth; (2) the body of the text and the visual and sonic presence of the living Guru; (3) the sonic resonances of the text as it is read, recited, memorized, and sung communally and individually. On the other hand, and in paradoxical fashion, its philosophical concept *mediates immediacy*, in the sense that it provides access to a liberating epistemology, which annihilates all manner of duality: Guru versus Sikh, self versus other, subject versus object, materiality versus ideality. In other words, it pushes physical mediation (embodiment, textuality, sonic resonance) towards an absolute immediacy signified by the term *anhad śabad* (incorporeal word, soundless sound, unpulsed vibration, etc). It is this paradoxical principle that grounds Sikh epistemology, informs its ontological ethics, and therefore the potential for it to be shared with the wider world. It is this principle more than any other aspect that has prevented Sikhism becoming just another Indian sect or Guru-cult. At the same time, however, it also marks a central point of divergence between those who prefer a living preceptor whose voice and physical presence mediates authority as opposed to mainstream Khalsa Sikhism, which adheres to the *śabad-guru* principle as it has manifested either in various forms or formlessly as a spiritual-philosophical principle.

This broad divergence between Khalsa Sikhism's *śabad*-centrism and the preference of non-Khalsa sects and *dehdhari* gurus can also be seen as a fault line within the broader Sikh community. Although this fault line has been exacerbated by local and national politics, the nature of its disjuncture has also been somewhat misunderstood by an influential strand of scholarship, which has significantly underplayed the politico-theological, philosophical, and mystical nuances of *śabad-guru* as a doctrine. Until relatively recently, the dominant strand of scholarship in modern Sikh studies exhibited a tendency (1) to highlight the more visible aspects of Guruship, notably the master's *living* presence, personal charisma, and holiness; (2) to stress that the Guru and his teaching is "essentially

religious,” resulting in a praxical ideal of detachment and non-engagement in worldly and political affairs. This is especially the case with the work of W.H. McLeod and scholars who followed his lead in the decades between the late 1960s to 2010 (McLeod 1968, 1975; Cole 1978, 1982; Nesbitt 2005, 2013; Fenech 2000; Jakobsh 2012). Based on a largely positivist form of historiography, McLeod’s work suggested that there was a qualitative and progressive deviation or fall from the pristine religiosity of Nanak (to which he attributes closest proximity to the divine source) and that of the later Gurus who became involved in political affairs (Mandair 2009). From this perspective, events such as the creation of the Khalsa are represented as epitomizing the divergence from “explicitly religious” and peaceful origins associated with the Nanak-Panth, towards the kind of political involvement in violence, social justice, and affairs of the State characteristic of Khalsa Sikhism (Mandair 2022a).

From here on, the false assumption concerning the “fundamental change in the dominant philosophy of Panth” (McLeod 1984: 11) from the peaceful message of the early Nanak-Panth to the violent message of the later Sikh Gurus culminating in the Khalsa-Panth becomes centralized in discourses of Sikh studies, South Asian studies, and the history of religions. Furthermore, once this narrative was normalized within academic discourses, it was but a short step to portray the Khalsa as a suspect entity prone to anti-State activity and responsible for spreading anarchic violence. This negative stereotype about Khalsa Sikhs was deployed by the Indian state vis-à-vis its think-tanks who in turn fed the Indian and global media from the late 1970s onward. As I have argued at length elsewhere, at best this thesis says more about the political ideology and governance mechanisms of modern liberal states than it does about early Sikh history (Mandair 2009, 2015, 2022a). At worst it reflects an imperializing tendency inherent within the modern state (British and Indian), which deprives indigenous traditions of the right to define and participate in their own sense of sovereign consciousness.

While the dominant Sikh political system, represented by the Akali Dal and its ecclesiastical arm, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee (SGPC), has tried to minimize tensions between Khalsa and non-Khalsa formations in the broader Sikh community, at various times throughout the twentieth century the fault line has erupted into violent confrontations between Khalsa and non-Khalsa denominations. In most cases the tensions can be attributed to perceived external challenges to the centrality of the *Guru Granth Sahib* as the source of spiritual-political authority and therefore also to the Khalsa-Panth. Since the 1970s, whenever such confrontations occurred, the mainly state-controlled Indian media tended to categorize Khalsa-centrism as a conservative religious orthodoxy unwilling to entertain plurality within the Sikh political-spiritual system. Throughout the 1980s there was a noticeable trend where many Western and Indian scholars presented the very idea of the Khalsa in a particularly negative light. Their articles and books contributed to feeding Western and state-sanctioned Indian media with an Orientalist stereotype of a “pacifist Nanak Panth” in contrast to a more violence-prone Khalsa-Panth. Among the many examples of this trend is the work of Roger Ballard and Rajiv Kapur. The recent work by Richard D. Mann published in the journal *Sikh Formations* challenges these earlier trends by exposing the role of Indian and Western media in “framing” Khalsa Sikhism as essentially violent (Kapur 1986; Mann 2016).

While this is neither entirely untrue nor entirely different from other disputes concerning Guru-traditions, where contestations over authority are common and widespread, nevertheless the overly negative stereotyping of Khalsa as a regressive, anti-pluralistic entity overlooks a factor of crucial importance, one that is specific to the Sikh context. It has to do with the fact that the “Guru” is not just a corporeal entity (the *Granth* or scripture or a historical figure), but perhaps more importantly, it is also an axial philosophical and therefore incorporeal *concept* in Sikhi or *gurmat*. This can be seen in the lexicon of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and related literature giving rise to terms such as

gurmat (logic or teaching of the Guru), *gurprasad*, or *gurdwara*, or *gurbani* – all of which are intimately woven into Sikh life practices. If we probe the meaning of Guru in this literature and specifically its linkage to the term *śabad* (Word/language of the Guru), what emerges is an impersonal concept of *śabad-guru*, which, in addition to being a pivotal concept in the Sikh lexicon, radically deconstructs vestiges of personhood and personal sovereignty. In other words, *śabad-guru* might be regarded as an onto-epistemological concept that paradoxically sustains what might be considered a “radical-orthopraxy” (Khalsa-centrism) by shifting the tradition away from vesting authority in a person towards consciousness in general.

In the following section I would like to explore some political-theological implications of the equation of *śabad* with *guru* as *śabad-guru*. In a sister-essay that explores the mediational phenomenology of *śabad*-Guru doctrine in the context of conflicts of Guruship (Mandair 2023), I have highlighted some recent examples of flashpoints that have exacerbated existing fault lines between mainstream (Khalsa-centric) Sikhism and sectarian groups that pay reverence to personal gurus often referred to as “Babas” or “Sant-Babas.” In that essay I asked how some of the sectarian Baba movements play on the community’s collective mnemo-praxis and visual imagination, which continues to retain an emotional link to the living presence of charismatic preceptors vis-à-vis the ten historical Sikh Gurus. Conversely, to what extent does the mainstream Khalsa-Panth’s often thorny relationship with dera-Babas and related Guru-cults mirror a long-standing ideological struggle and fundamental difference between Sikh and Vedic doctrine? And to what extent is the latter struggle reflected in the current political tensions between the Sikhs and contemporary Hindu nationalism? While in that chapter I managed to contextualize the philosophical concept of *śabda*-as-guru within contemporary Sikh culture, in the remainder of this particular chapter, I limit myself to asking whether (and if so how) the concept of *śabad-guru* can transform notions of sovereignty, especially in the diaspora, as loyalty comes to be invested in a geographically non-locatable, non-historical principle? Although it should not be regarded as a rule of thumb, the fault line between Khalsa-centrism and anti-Khalsa-centrism is nevertheless a helpful indicator of broader tendencies within Sikhism towards or against personal gurus. This is particularly evident in the way that the intellectual social and political movements to modernize Sikhism instigated by the Singh Sabha reformists in the late nineteenth century culminated in the establishment of the Sikh code of conduct, the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (SRM) in 1950, under the auspices of the SGPC (McLeod 1989). The SRM affirms the definition of a Sikh as a “person who professes the Sikh religion, believes and follows the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the ten Gurus” (McLeod 1984: 79; McLeod 2003). This key point about this definition is that it reestablishes the centrality or axiomatic status of the nature of Guruship and therefore authority in the global Sikh community, as vested not only in the corpus of the Scripture as a canonical scriptural text, a “Book” as many modern-day Sikhs refer to it, but even more importantly in the instructional logic or teaching (lit. *gurmat*) contained within the texts. The emphasis on *gurmat* was crucial to the Singh Sabha’s entire scholarly effort over a period of 70 years (from the 1880s to the 1950s) to reestablish the nature and location of authority. I shall return to this point in more detail in the next section of this article, as it harbors a fault line *within* a fault line – what might be called an interiorizing fault line that is often missed by modern Western Sikh studies and to some extent even by traditionalist Khalsa-centric Sikh scholars. For this current section, I’d like to probe some of the social implications and manifestations of the Khalsa\anti-Khalsa fault line. The main societal implication arises from the fact that within the global Sikh community, there are a number of groups who did not accept that prior to his death, Guru Gobind Singh uttered the injunction “*guru manio granth, pargat guran ki deh*” (consider this Granth/text to as the embodiment of the Guru), which effectively ended the line of living, personal Gurus (Singh 1983). This refusal can be seen in their continuation of lines of human gurus. Exemplary of this kind

of reluctance to accept the Adi Granth as Guru, or acceptance of Khalsa-centrism, are groups such as the Namdharis, Nirankaris, Radhasoamis, and other organizations loosely categorized as Sant-groups or *dera*-Babas. Presented in the next section are a few characteristics of each of these groups, after which I focus on the Nirankaris and *dera*-Babas, which have come into violent conflict over the question of personal Guruship.

“Guru” as an Epistemic Principle: *śabad-guru*

Before turning this discussion towards the philosophical concept of *śabda-guru*, let me start by reiterating and elaborating on a point that was signaled at the outset of this chapter. During the lifetime of the Sikh Gurus, the Guru-Sikh relationship remained largely within the Indic tradition of oral mediation. The ontological question “what is a Guru?” did not arise (Mandair 2009: 263). A living Guru’s spoken word and personality were taken as marks of authority. While this continued during the lifetimes of the first nine Gurus (from Nanak to Tegh Bahadur) prior to his death, the tenth and last living or personal (*dehdhari*) Guru declared that all authority in the form of Guruship would pass jointly to the Adi Granth (which would henceforth be known as *Guru Granth Sahib*) and to the community led by the Khalsa Panth. Hence, the doctrine of dual sovereignty of *Guru Granth* (Guru-as-text) and *Guru Panth* (Guru-as-Khalsa) emerged as central. Arguably the primary role of the Khalsa was to safeguard the spiritual sovereignty of the Guru Granth and specifically its role as repository of the ultimate or true Guru, the *satguru*. As the historian J.S. Grewal argued, especially in the eighteenth century, the doctrine of dual authority provided “a sense of solidarity and unity of action” (Grewal 1996: 46) and consolidated the belief that the Guru was ever-present amongst the Sikhs both as text (Granth) and as community (Panth). This in turn aided the evolution of a related institution known as *Gurumata*, which played a crucial role in fostering expressions of political and spiritual sovereignty for the Sikh Panth. The word *mata* in Punjabi means a decision agreed by common assent in democratically convened meetings. Hence, the *gurumata* was seen as morally binding resolution and as a medium of expression for political sovereignty.

Throughout much of the eighteenth century, although the power of the Mughal empire was steadily declining, Khalsa forces nevertheless remained preoccupied with survival and warfare. As a result, the management of Sikh historical shrines and centers of learning (*taksaals*) passed into the custodianship of Udasi and Nirmala sects. This trend continued in the early decades of the nineteenth century under the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who not only patronized Udasi and Nirmala ashrams but also abolished the institution of *Gurumata*. An important consequence of this was a pronounced diffusion of Vedic and Puranic concepts into existing Sikh interpretive frameworks. Udasi and Nirmala scholars generally subscribed to a worldview determined by the Brahmanic *sanātana dharma*, an axiomatic principle of Hindu orthodoxy governed by the theological paradigm of “Eternal Sanskrit” (Deshpande 1993) and the centrality of the Veda. At the core of the eternal Sanskrit paradigm are several interlinked assumptions. First, that the essence of language (*śabad*) is voice (*vāk*), and *vāk* indicates the living presence of a person capable of sounding *vak* here and now. Secondly, that because *vāk* as phoneme is eternal and immutable, it is intrinsically sacred. Thirdly, a prohibition against *vāk* being written because the written signifier represented the death of the living presence or person. As I have noted elsewhere (Mandair 2009), it is well-known that the predominance of orality in Indian tradition was not the result of Indians’ inability to write but was in fact a conscious decision sustained over a long period of time to restrict the mediation of knowledge to orality, thereby suppressing written sources. The ultimate purpose was to preserve ritual purity of Aryas vis-à-vis *dharma* and sociolinguistic identity. This prohibition goes back to the early Upanisads, which stipulated that a Brahmin should not recite or orally transmit the Veda after

he has eaten meat, seen a dead body or blood, or engaged in writing. In short, phonemes that were written were considered signifier of death. Taken together, these aspects of the doctrine of eternal Sanskrit translated into a cultural preference within the *sanātan dharma* worldview for personal (*dehdhārī*) gurus whose living presence was a conduit for *vāk* and *śabad*.

As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere, it is precisely this principle that is resisted by mainstream Khalsa mnemo-praxis and the Sikh philosophical conception of *śabad-guru*. This mnemo-praxis is broadly encompassed by the term *gurmāt* (teaching, logic, or philosophy of the Guru). While the most obvious example of such resistance to *sanātana dharma* is in Guru Gobind Singh's performative closure of the line of living Gurus and prostration before the Adi Granth, formally conferring the title of Guru, this was by no means a new event. For example, as noted earlier, the fifth Guru, Arjan, who compiled the Adi Granth in 1604, had already elevated the scriptural text above his own personal status by formally installing it in the Harimandar Sahib, thus giving it central place in developing Sikh rituals and ceremonial practices (Pashaura Singh 2004, 2014).

However, it is important to note that the depersonalization of *Guruship* does not begin with Arjan but with the first Guru, Nanak himself. Although Nanak formally initiated the succession of personal gurus by passing the *gurgaddi* to his chosen successor, Angad, it is also important to note *what* exactly he had passed on and why. Thus, while scholars are generally agreed that Nanak passed on a *pothi* or corpus of manuscripts containing his own authorized poetic compositions (Mann 2001; Pashaura Singh 2004), what remains an undercurrent in this scholarship is nature of the incorporeal teaching or philosophy (*gurmāt*) at the heart of these writings. For at the core of this teaching is an answer to these questions: What is a Guru? Or what is the function of a Guru? An answer that is expressed in terms of the philosophical concept of *śabad-guru* as the preferred vehicle for effecting spiritual liberation or self-transformation. It is because soteriology is intimately tied to the concept of *śabad-guru*, and because *śabad-guru* is a cornerstone of Nanak's own experience and his teaching, that this principle becomes a measure of the kind of sovereign consciousness that the last living Guru (Gobind Singh) bequeathed to the Khalsa, which in turn enshrined into its praxical memory and endeavored to protect and defend often at the cost of individual life itself. It became literally a matter of living and dying (Mandair 2022b: 64–66). Let me return briefly to look more closely at *śabad-guru* as a philosophical concept.

***Satguru* as *Śabad*: Depersonalizing the Function of Guru**

One thing that cuts across all Guru-traditions and Guru-sects is the term *satguru* (or *sadhguru*), which refers to the ultimate, true or real Guru: the one who claims authority to teach and instruct others based on personal experience. In the Indian wisdom traditions, and those Sikh sects that defer to the authority of these traditions (for example Radhasoamis, Namdharis, Sant-Nirankaris, and many dera-Babas), the authoritative source of the teaching, instruction, technique, or path leading to enlightenment is usually provided by a living person acting as a preceptor.

By contrast, mainstream Sikhism, beginning with Nanak's distinctive deployment of the term *satguru*, indicates that the kind of spiritual transformation articulated in texts such as the *Guru Granth Sahib* should not be reliant on a living human preceptor. It is more efficacious to try and attain it directly through one's own effort, for the simple reason that the desired experience is singular in nature. It is not only unique to each person but the state of consciousness it enjoins students to achieve is marked by immediacy, a lack of quantifiable distance, a state that can only be realized within the interiority of one's consciousness. Of course, as any perceptive student of Indian thought knows, this emphasis on immediacy and interior consciousness was first discovered and recorded in the early Upanisads, after which it was endlessly analyzed and debated in the philosophical schools.

If that's the case, how does Sikhism differ? The short answer lies in how the principle of immediacy and/or access to interior consciousness as a vehicle of liberation is socially implemented and institutionalized. Whereas orthodox Hinduism restricted access mainly to the Brahmin caste (the theology of Eternal Sanskrit and the *varna-ashram-dharma* being essential tools for this task), Guru Nanak enshrined it at the center of his teaching, on every page of the *Adi Granth*, in every form of mnemo-praxis, and eventually, through the agency of his successor, Gurus, within the form of the community known as Khalsa. With Brahminism, the point was to conserve authority and conserve a social in-group by policing consciousness, whereas for Khalsa Sikhism, the whole point is to devolve authority, to give the means of liberation back to the people. In terms of mediational phenomenology, Brahminical Hinduism shifts the function of *mediation* back to the personal figure of the Brahmin as the conservator of Veda and Eternal Sanskrit, and the *varna* system – in this sense Brahminism is a highly effective system of preserving sovereignty of the self. In contradistinction, the *śabad-guru* principle, in conjunction with the Khalsa as a social formation, works (in theory at least) to “annihilate” ego (liberating the self from itself) and prevent the accumulation of personal sovereignty as the basis for mediating authority.

This rejection of personal sovereignty is explained by Nanak himself in one of his compositions known as *Siddh Gosht* (*Dialogue with the Siddhas*). The dialogue itself involves a discussion about the ultimate source of Nanak's authority as a spiritual master in his own right. As Nanak explains, the source of his authority is the *satguru* (true Guru), but when asked who his *satguru* is, Nanak suggests that it derives from a nonhuman source, which resides in the interior of one's consciousness. Although *satguru* is rather conveniently translated as “God,” more precisely, it refers to an interior wellspring, a living force inherent within all life that remains hidden from us due to the kind of psychic orientation attained through acculturation to conventional societal norms. In stanzas 43 and 44 of the *Siddh Gosht*, the debate between Nanak and the Siddhas reaches a climax as the Siddhas directly confront Nanak about the source of his knowledge and therefore about the source of his authority as a spiritual master.

Siddhas (43)

What is the origin (of your power)?
What system of knowledge commands respect today?
Who is your guru? Whose disciple, are you?
Which knowledge leads to detachment?
Let Nanak speak and explain to us
Which Word (or teaching) can liberate us?

Nanak replies (44):

Breath is the origin (of my practice and power).
the Gurus logic is the knowledge in this age.
Word is Guru: Consciousness attuned to it, is the disciple.
Through the Incorporeal Word, detachment can be attained.
Only through the Word (śabda) can the state of Oneness be described,
Embodying Oneness/detachment, the gurmukh quenches the fire of ego.

What stands out in these stanzas is the directness and specificity of Nanak's reply regarding what a *satguru* is. For Nanak, and for each of the Gurus in the lineage up to the tenth Nanak, Gobind

Singh, *satguru* is *śabad* (expression/word/desire/concept), which is also referred to as *anhad śabad* (unpulsed/incorporeal word) – a pure or egoless speech and thought that resonates with the underlying sonic-mnemonic theme of creation (*nam*) and, in resonating, unlocks and reveals the creative potentials inherent within human consciousness (see Mandair 2022b). From this perspective, it is not incorrect to say that *śabad* is the nonhuman, anthropomorphic agent of revelation, and revelation in Nanak's philosophy (which cannot be equated with the Abrahamic sense of speaking-hearing of God's voice) is tied to the epistemic function of *śabad* as the non-anthropomorphic agent of spiritual self-realization.

A more productive way of thinking about this is to regard *satguru* as the force immanent within conscious life that enables a transformation of the psyche from its everyday, contracted or egocentric state of consciousness (*manmukh* in Nanak's lexicon) to an expanded state of consciousness, which, paradoxically, is achieved only by egoloss. The clearest indication of this transformed state is registered through various modes of expression (language/thought/desire) comprising our aesthetic sensibility.

The agent of this transformation is *śabad*, almost strictly *anhad śabad* (unpulsed or incorporeal word/vibration). The qualifier *anhad*, which literally means unbeaten or unpulsed, unstruck, is crucially important not only for understanding what *śabad* is (its ontology) but also how it functions in the conversion/transforming process and, therefore, how and why it replaces the personal touch of human mediation. Throughout his compositions, Nanak emphasizes that *śabad* is only attained by "dying to the word" or "dying to the self," meaning that an individual must sacrifice herself to the word. The references to sacrifice and dying are in fact indicators of a performative mnemonic-praxis called *nam simaran* that Sikhs are supposed to inculcate into their lives. *Nam simaran* literally means to remember *nam*, to bring *nam* to mind in each moment. But to do so requires a performative – real and symbolic – death of the self at the very moment in which the self is generated. If one can achieve the balance (*sahaj*) of living and dying and weave it into the very fabric of the self, this new "self" that emerges can no longer see itself as an objectifiable entity representable as manifold forms (*sargun*). It is "now" neither form nor formless (*nirgun*), neither self nor nonself, but only *pure relation to all that exists*. The most evident marker of this *self-as-pure-relation* is the change in its mode of expression. It expresses itself only in the form of poesis, melody, rhythm, which are all modes that reflect its central characteristic, which is neither thing-ness nor no-thingness, but only vibration (*nad* or *śabad*), or more accurately *anhad śabad* (spontaneous or effortless vibration, or unpulsed, unstruck, uncaused word-sound). All these references to vibration or resonance are metaphoric ways of describing the nature of self as pure relation. That is to say, the self as a force of connection or relation to the world, a fundamental opening of the self to its outside, its other, such that the duality of self (what is near) and world (the far) is merged in the vibration that is *nam*.

Implications of *Śabad* Philosophy?

Considering the previous discussion, what might be some sociopolitical implications of understanding *satguru-as-śabad*, or to consider *śabad* as *anhad śabad* (pure resonance)? The first and most obvious is the depersonalization of the function of Guru, which functions to displace the need for human mediation in the spiritual quest for perfection of the psyche. As a principle, it indicates both the immediacy of the spiritual experience and that this experience is open to anyone. Because the emphasis of Nanak's teaching seems to be on im-/mediation rather than mediation, a human agent is unnecessary. Accordingly, the sovereign experience through which this resonant force is released (or "revealed") itself becomes the touchstone of all authority in a way that has implications for social and political practice. Although the philosophic conception of *śabad* might seem somewhat esoteric,

abstract, and beyond the pale of media journalism (which has always found it more expedient to present spectacles of violence associated with misleading clichés of violent Khalsa Sikhism versus pacifist Sikhism of the Sants and Babas), it is worth noting that the concept of *śabad-guru* is routinely discussed within exegetical discourses of mainstream Khalsa Sikhism by itinerant preachers, *kirtanias*, and *katha vachiks*. From this perspective alone, it ought to be regarded as notion that encourages tendencies towards “democratizing” spirituality by never allowing it to accumulate in a person. Conversely, from the perspective that emerges from the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the practice of certain dera-Babas and Sant groups to concentrate authority in a person might be regarded as an “anti-democratic” preference for silent and pliable *sangats*, thereby hiding a highly exploitable proto-fascist tendencies under the veil of unquestioning “devotion” to a charismatic master.

As the rise and mediatization of Guru-cults and militant *sadhus* throughout North India have shown us, the veneer of “devotion” has been cleverly exploited by major political formations such as the BJP with party leaders themselves performing the roles of *sadhu/guru*-in-chief. The concept of *śabad-guru*, as practiced by the Sikh Gurus and enshrined into the sociopolitical *raison d’être* of the Khalsa, was designed to circumvent any potential tendency towards any such fascism (in the psycho-political sense) that might arise. The reasons for Khalsa Sikhism not being able to entirely live up to the promise of this concept could be laid, on the one hand, at the door of the political system that was adopted after the British relinquished control of Sikh shrines to the Akalis vis-à-vis the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, after which Khalsa Sikhism redefined its role as the body-politic of Sikhism. For over a century the Akali leadership was able to successfully leverage new self-definition of the Sikhism as a “religion.” The problem with the category of religion, however, is that it was invented in the modern era and served a very specific function on behalf of the liberal state. Basically religion was a legal category of governance in keeping with the liberal statecraft of the British and deployed with clinical efficiency by the imperial British state and Indian post-independence state. On the other hand (and this is a direct consequence of the legal religionization of the Khalsa following the Sikh Gurdwaras Act), the blame lies in a lack of introspection and application of the *śabad-guru* concept to the Khalsa itself. In other words, for the Khalsa to rule (and stay true to its invocation of “*Raj Karega Khalsa*”) it needs to spiritually surrender to the *śabad-guru* principle.

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3

THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

Pashaura Singh

Introduction

The primary scripture of the Sikhs is the *Ādi Granth* (“Original Scripture”), commonly referred to as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (“The Honorable Scripture as Teacher”) to reflect its authoritative status within the Sikh community (Panth) as the living embodiment of the Guru. For Sikhs, it succeeded Guru Gobind Singh, who terminated the line of personal Gurus before he passed away in 1708, installing the *Ādi Granth* as “Guru Eternal for the Sikhs,” along with the collective body of the Khalsa to make decisions in accordance with its teachings. The *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGS) has always been the perennial source of guidance for the development of Sikh identity, and it is treated with royal honor and dignity when it is installed ceremonially on the seat of authority (*mañjī sāhib*) under a canopy in a *gurdvārā* (“Guru’s house,” the place of Sikh worship) to preside over the congregation. The formation of the *Ādi Granth* text, and its transformation into scripture, illuminates trajectories of production, circulation, and dissemination from orality to manuscript to print, from the place of its origin into the world, granting its special place in the world literary sphere. Given the global presence of the Sikh community due to large-scale migration, it is a text with worldwide readership, providing guidance on any ethical dilemmas in response to changing historical contexts and local situations in India and the diaspora. Thus, it plays a central role in determining both faith and lifeworld of the global Sikh community (Pashaura Singh 2020).

This study is focused on the formation of the Sikh canon, general physical description of its content, structure, and organization, its sacred language, its central themes, its meaning reflected in multiple interpretations, its place in Sikh rituals and ceremonies, and finally its ongoing role in the life of the Sikh community. Recent research has made us aware of contesting views of canon formation in the Sikh tradition (Pashaura Singh 2002). Much of the scholarly debate has been revolving around the examination of early manuscripts that were hitherto lying hidden in the possession of certain families or in the archives of academic institutions. This study will address certain academic issues related to the making of Sikh scripture in the historical context of Mughal India. It will seek to understand plurality of textual meanings and actual performative practices related to liturgy, ceremonies, and communal solidarity. Finally, it will examine the ongoing role of the Sikh scripture as “Guru,” both as a normative source of authority and as a prodigious living force in personal and corporate spheres of the Sikh Panth (Pashaura Singh 2014).

Formation of the Sikh Canon

The formation of the Sikh canon involved a much more complex process than the tradition would have us believe. It began during Guru Nanak's own lifetime and continued to evolve during the period of successive Gurus. The writing of *gurbāṇī* ("inspired utterances of the Guru") was regarded as a devotional activity in the early Sikh community: "Blessed is the paper, blessed is the pen, blessed is the inkwell, and blessed is the ink. Blessed is the writer, O Nanak, who writes the True Name" (GGS 1291). During the last period of Guru Nanak's life at Kartarpur, there existed a single codex of his writings referred to as a *pothī* ("volume") in early Sikh literature, which he bestowed on his successor Guru Angad (1504–1552). The updating of this scriptural corpus continued under the care of successive Gurus. The Sodhi family of Guru Har Sahai village in Ferozepur District claimed to have possessed this original pothi until 1970, when it was stolen in a train-robbery. Giani Gurdit Singh published four photographs of certain folios of the Guru Har Sahai Pothi in his book *Itihās Sṛī Gurū Granth Sāhib* (1990). He had examined the volume on different occasions in 1960s before its loss. For intensive paleographic arguments, however, we need more evidence about the script of the first section of the pothi. The available photographs of Guru Har Sahai Pothi provide only a skeleton-like primitive written outline of Gurmukhi script. For the time being, we must suspend our judgment on the issue of its identity with Guru Nanak's original pothi.

A four-volume written collection appeared as the Goindval Pothis during the period of the third Guru, Amar Das (1479–1574). The two extant copies of these volumes at Jalandhar and Pinjore provide us with the earliest writings of the first three Gurus and the Bhagats ("devotees"), such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Namdev, among others. Their structure reveals that the key organizing principle was based upon *rāgas* ("melodies"), keeping in mind the needs of the performing singers (*rāgīs*). Gurinder Singh Mann regards these volumes as the earliest extant source of the Sikh canon (Mann 1996), whereas Pritam Singh did not subscribe to this viewpoint. In his analysis of Ahiyapur Pothi (/Jalandhar Pothi), Singh rejected the so-called "borrowing theory," claiming that Guru Arjan had to acquire the Goindval Pothis from Baba Mohan on loan for the purpose of the compilation of the Adi Granth (Pritam Singh 1998). Nevertheless, these two volumes must be regarded as based upon the original Goindval Pothis or some other genuine sources because scribal tradition was a common feature of that period. They are still the oldest scriptural manuscripts at our disposal. The Gurmukhi script used in these volumes represents an early stage of orthography when vowel signs were not yet fully developed.

Bula and Pandha, the renowned scribe and singer of Guru Amar Das's period, prepared anthologies of devotional literature called *guṭakās* ("handbooks") and pothis for various Sikh congregations. The fourth Guru, Ram Das (1534–1581) provided a new musical dimension to the evolving Sikh scriptural corpus by adding eleven new ragas to the existing system of nineteen ragas employed by Guru Nanak for his compositions. The index of the Kartarpur Pothi (1604) clearly states that the text of the introductory *Japu* (of Guru Nanak) was copied from a manuscript written in Guru Ram Das's own hands, confirming his involvement in making copies of collections of *gurbāṇī*. Although no manuscript of his works has survived, he frequently encouraged the professional class of scribes to write *gurbāṇī* for the purpose of distribution among the various Sikh congregations: "Those hands are pure and holy, my soul, which are used in writing the praises of the Lord" (GGS 540). By stressing the spiritual significance of sacred writings, Guru Ram Das raised the status of the scribes who were otherwise held in low esteem in India (Pashaura Singh 2000: 19).

The making of the Adi Granth evidently owes much to the enormous energies of Guru Arjan (1563–1606), who was the principal force behind the process of consolidation of the Sikh tradition taking place within the larger context of doctrinal and institutional developments of his times. He

updated the existing collection by substantially increasing it and prepared an authoritative text in 1604. The cultural environment of Mughal India during Emperor Akbar's reign provided the historical context for the creation of a unified scripture for the Sikh Panth. During Guru Arjan's reign, Ramdaspur (/Amritsar) had become the central institution of scribal activity, prioritizing a substantial textual tradition. It provided a safe place known as the *pothī mahal* (abode of the books), where the sacred volumes were stored with sanctity. It was parallel to the *kitāb khānā* ("library/atelier") of Mughal emperors who were following a time-honored and valued tradition. To have a great library was considered the sign, perhaps even the function of a great ruler in the Islamic world. The cultural environment of the times reflected a world peopled by calligraphers and illuminators, papermakers and line drawers, bookbinders, and margin markers, also, of librarians and superintendents and inventory keepers. Emperor Akbar's visit to Goindval on November 4, 1598, was indeed the high point of a cordial relationship between the Mughals and the Sikhs. It provided Guru Arjan with a firsthand opportunity to look closely at the accompanying imperial ensemble (*naubat*) and illustrated manuscripts that were displayed as part of the Mughal policy of disseminating information among the people. It is a well-known fact that artists, scribes, painters, and musicians always accompanied Akbar. This display of imperial paraphernalia served as a visible sign of authority. It is highly likely that Guru Arjan made up his mind on this occasion to create an authoritative text of the Adi Granth for the Sikh community (Pashaura Singh 2006: 137–141).

The writing of manuscript MS 1245 (ca. 1599) had certainly begun immediately after Emperor Akbar's visit to Goindval. One of the opening folios of this manuscript bore a *shamsā* ("sunburst") that had unmistakable links with high Islamicate traditions of manuscript decoration (Deol 2003: 53). It was certainly drawn by an artist who had prior experience in illuminating Persian and Arabic manuscripts in the city of Lahore – the closest location from Ramdaspur, from where the Sikh scribes normally bought paper and other writing material. The existence of textual specialists and scribes in turn implied considerable economic resources, including both an organized and wealthy Sikh Panth at Ramdaspur to support such communities of scholars and wealth to obtain the necessary materials needed for scholarly work, such as properly gathered and prepared sets of paper made in Sialkot and Kashmir, ink, and writing instruments. Ramdaspur had indeed become the hub of preparing and preserving the pothis of *gurbānī*. The examination of the pre-canonical manuscripts of Guru Arjan's period places them in the following chronological order: MS 1245 (ca. 1599) is the oldest, followed by the Bahoval Pothi (ca. 1600), the *Vanjārā* Pothi (ca. 1601), the Bhai Rupa Pothi (ca. 1603), and the Sursingh Pothi (Pashaura Singh 2008b: 1016). All these documents predate the 1604 Kartarpur Pothi. They provide traces of documentary evidence to build a framework on the redaction process of establishing a fixed text.

Balwant Singh Dhillon questions the origins of the pre-canonical texts in sectarian trends in the early Sikh community (Dhillon 1999). His main arguments are based upon the premise that to maintain the traditional view, it would be best for the faithful to deny the very existence of early manuscripts. In a spirited debate, Dhillon has clearly set out a "fundamentalist position" contrary to other scholarly analyses (Shackle 2008: 257). By contrast, Piar Singh and Jeevan Deol regard these early manuscripts as "independent collections" originating in different geographical areas (Piar Singh 1996 and Deol 2001). Following a linear approach, Gurinder Singh Mann focuses on the evolution of the Sikh sacred text from the pre-canonical stage, represented by the Guru Har Sahai Pothi, the Goindval Pothis, and Guru Nanak Dev University MS 1245, through the Kartarpur Pothi, to the final composition of the Adi Granth by Guru Gobind Singh in the last decades of the seventeenth century. He offers a hypothesis that originally the Kartarpur Pothi contained all the additional compositions of the Banno version, which were removed from the Kartarpur text only in the twentieth century. For him, the Kartarpur and Banno (/Kanpur) versions represent one and the

same thing (Mann 2001: 66–67). Taking a radically different approach from other contesting views, the present study offers a theory of “working drafts” prepared under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan to understand the process of canon formation. This process does not seem to involve a linear mode of operation in any way, copying directly from one codex to another. Rather, several codices were being used simultaneously during the redaction process to establish the canon. The texts were read and reread frequently to arrive at the final reading that was approved by Guru Arjan with his editorial remark *sudh* (“correct”) in the margins at certain places (Pashaura Singh 2014: 127).

Despite Guru Arjan’s remarkable editorial achievement in preparing an authoritative text in 1604, there emerged three different recensions of the Adi Granth in the course of time. The principal reason for this development was due to the unstable situation created by Guru Arjan’s execution in 1606 under the orders of Mughal Emperor Jahangir. This event became the turning point in the history of the Sikh tradition, creating a new situation that was conducive to sectarian tendencies within the Panth. The manuscript evidence has brought to light another recension that was prepared in 1610 when Jahangir imprisoned Guru Hargobind in the Gwalior fort. It is popularly known as Lahori *bīr* or “recension” because it was found at a shrine in Lahore. The Lahore recension differs from the Kartarpur version only in its concluding section. It has a different order, sometimes ending with the *shaloks* (“couplets or stanzas”) of Kabir and Farid, and sometimes with the panegyrics by the Sikh bards in praise of the Gurus. In 1642, a Sikh named Banno traditionally prepared another recension of the Adi Granth at Khara Mangat in Gujrat district. The Banno *bīr* consists of the Kartarpur text plus some unauthorized additions. It originated at a time when the main center of Sikh activities shifted from Amritsar to Kiratpur under Guru Hargobind (1590–1644), who had to withdraw to the Shivalik hills due to the pressure of Mughal authorities. The central place of Amritsar fell into the hands of *Mīnās* (“Scoundrels”), the followers of Prithi Chand (Guru Arjan’s elder brother) and his descendants. In many instances, the later scribes and their groups within the Panth failed to understand the editorial insights of Guru Arjan and struggled with problematic texts. Some of them made some intentional changes in the text to reflect the changed historical situation of the Panth. A close examination of the unauthorized texts of Banno recension has revealed their origins in *Mīnā*, Udasi, Hindālī, Bhāṭṭrā, and Brahminical sources. This theory supplements the factor of external interference by the Mughal officials with the internal pressure created within the Sikh community after Guru Arjan’s execution. It is not simply a conspiracy theory but rather a radical hypothesis which illuminates the power struggle between different groups within the Panth (Pashaura Singh 2000: 212–217).

To prevent the circulation of three different versions of the Adi Granth, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), closed the canon by adding the works of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), to the original compilation during the last decades of the seventeenth century at a place called Damdama Sahib in Anandpur. This event marked a significant completion of a matrix of revelation for the Sikh community. It was asserted that core truths of the tradition had been established irrevocably, and the documents included in the canon were a witness to these truths in an authoritative way. This process reflected the top-down mode of canonization in the history of scriptural traditions under the sole authority of the tenth Guru, who successfully thwarted the powerplay of sectarian groups. This final text is popularly known as the Damdama *bīr*, a version that provides the text of the modern *Guru Granth Sahib*. Notably, two manuscripts of the Damdama *bīr*, written in *sambat* 1739 (1682 CE) and *sambat* 1748 (1691 CE) were housed in the Sikh Reference Library, Amritsar, and were destroyed in 1984 during Operation Blue Star (Pashaura Singh 2000: 224). There still exists several manuscripts of this standard Damdama version around Anandpur and Bathinda area, the main centers of Sikh activities in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. A rare manuscript of Damdama version prepared in *sambat* 1764 (1707 CE) is preserved

at *Tōshākhānā* (“Abode of Precious Items”) of Takhat Sachkhand Sri Hazur Sahib Abchalnagar in Nanded, Maharashtra. Another beautiful “Golden Cover Volume” (*sunahīṛ bīṛ*) of this version traditionally prepared by Baba Dip Singh in *sambat* 1783 (1726 CE) at Damdama Sahib in Bathinda is preserved at *Tōshākhānā* of Darbar Sahib, Amritsar.

The closing of the canon, however, did not mean that other versions of the Adi Granth went out of circulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a matter of fact, the Banno recension was predominant. The revival of the standard text based upon the Damdama version took place during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), who was able to procure the Kartarpur volume for this purpose. He patronized the scribes who made beautiful, illuminated copies of this new version, which were sent as gifts to all the Sikh Takhats (“Thrones”) and other major gurdwaras. Notably, the Maharaja presented a beautiful copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, with two colored illustrations and finely decorated margins with artwork to Baba Sahib Singh Bedi, which is now in the possession of Baba Sarbjot Singh Bedi of Una Sahib. The first printed edition of the standard Damdama version appeared in 1864 that gave a fillip to its universal acceptance. The Singh Sabha reformers sanctified this standard version and set aside all other versions used in earlier centuries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Adi Granth text even attained a standard pagination of 1,430 pages in total as a result of printing uniformity during the colonial period.

The Content, Structure, and Organization of the Adi Granth

Guru Arjan’s prodigious efforts were responsible for the creation of Sikh scripture. He used the best possible words to crystallize the divine message. Indeed, his intention was to create a “letter-perfect text” for the Sikh community. He carefully directed the whole operation of recording of the Adi Granth. This is quite evident from his personal approval of the content, form, and organization of the *baṇī* in *rāga* sections, as indicated using the word *sudh* (“correct”) in the margins of the text. In fact, the use of such editorial directions as *sudh* and *sudh kīchai* (“make corrections”) in the Kartarpur Pothis and other early documents (such as the Bhai Rupa Pothis) make sense only when we place them in the historical context of what are normally described as the “inspection notes” (*arz-dīdah*) recorded in the flyleaves of imperial manuscripts prepared during Emperor Akbar’s reign (Pashaura Singh 2006: 160–161). In Mughal India, it was a well-established tradition of sending the books written by calligraphers and scribes for proofing by the comparing scribe, whose duty was to compare a copy with the original and correct any mistake. Such a specialist was called the corrector (*musahhīh*), who was a man of great ability and learning (Wade 1998: 14). Similarly, a professional class of calligraphers and scribes maintained the manuscripts of *gurbāṇī* at the Sikh court in the Guru’s archives (*pothī mahāl*). Historically, the pothis of *gurbāṇī* have always remained prized and been frequently used as ritual objects, and Sikh scribes have continually worked as carefully as possible to copy them, always holding dear the belief that they were producing as accurate and correct (*sudh*) a text as they could.

Guru Arjan’s achievement can be seen from the remarkably consistent structure of the Adi Granth, a text which is a masterpiece of organization. He devised certain checks and balances, which made it extremely difficult for anyone to interpolate extraneous matter in the text without being identified. Each entry in the Adi Granth is numbered and its position is further determined by its *raga*, authorship, and metrical form. Overall, the Adi Granth consists of 5,871 hymns of carefully recorded authorship. The code word “M” (*Mahallā*, “King”) with an appropriate number identifies the composition of each Guru. The works by Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, and Guru Tegh Bahadur are indicated by M1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 respectively. All the Gurus sign their compositions “Nanak” in the Adi Granth to stress the unity and continuity with the founder of the tradition.

The systematic arrangement of the Adi Granth reveals that Guru Arjan followed a well-defined pattern of organization that was seldom breached. The text of the Adi Granth is divided into three major sections. The introductory section includes three liturgical prayers: (1) Guru Nanak's *Japī* ("Meditation") is recited early in the morning, (2) five hymns of the *Sodar* ("That Door") text and four hymns of the *So Purakh* ("That Being") composition form part of the evening prayer, and (3) five hymns of *Sohilā* ("Praise") text are recited at bedtime.

The middle section contains the bulk of the material that is divided into 31 major *rāgas* ("melodic patterns") in the standard version of the Adi Granth. Each raga has further subdivisions based on the length of the compositions, beginning with the shorter *pad* genre (usually *chaupadas* or "four verses"), followed by other poetic forms (*aṣṭapadīs* or "octaves," *chhant* or "lyrical hymn," and other longer works such as Guru Nanak's *Siddh Goṣṭ*, Guru Amar Das's *Anand*, and Guru Arjan's *Sukhmanī*), and ending with the longer *vār* or "ballad." The hymns in each of these classifications are arranged in such a way that the works of Guru Nanak are placed first and are followed by those of the later Gurus in the order of their succession. Similarly, the works of the 15 Bhagats, collectively known as *Bhagat Bānī*, are arranged at the end of each raga-section (Pashaura Singh 2003: 1–41).

The final section includes an epilogue comprising of miscellaneous compositions that could not be accommodated in the middle section. It concludes with Guru Arjan's *Mundāvaṇī* ("Closing Seal") and his final *shalok* of gratitude, followed by a controversial text *Rāga-mālā* ("Garland of *rāgas*") at the end.

Sacred Language

The language of the Adi Granth presents an interesting variety, covering a range of linguistic usage and sustaining a sufficient degree of uniformity. Christopher Shackle has labelled its linguistic pattern with a single collective expression – "The Sacred Language of the Sikhs" (SLS) – with its "mixed character" drawing upon "a variety of local languages and dialects, as well as incorporating many archaic forms and words" (Shackle 1983: ii). Beginning with the Punjabi of Guru Nanak's *Japī*, it progresses through Western Hindi of Guru Arjan's *Sukhmanī*, eventually reaching the Braj of Guru Tegh Bahadur, representing a Punjabi/Western Hindi version of Sant Bhasha, a lingua franca employed by the poet-saints of North India (McLeod 1989: 85–86). It is however anachronistic to categorize the language of the Adi Granth as either Punjabi, Hindi, or Braj since these languages acquired recognizably distinct forms only somewhat later. It normally designates a language based on *Khārī Bolī* of the Delhi region that was used for religious poetry before and during the time of early Gurus.

Most instructively, the Sikh Gurus specifically call the language of their hymns as *Subhākhā* or "sweet language" (GGS 440, 568, 611, 626, and 1011). Notably, Guru Nanak employs Punjabi linguistic forms of his native Shekhupura area, whereas Guru Arjan tends more towards western Hindi. Certain hymns intended for different audiences take account of their own languages (for instance, Persian of Guru Nanak's opening *Tilāṅg* hymn addressed to Babur and his entourage) without abandoning the SLS framework. Similarly, Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan employed *Sahaskirtī* style to reach out to Hindu scholarly audience, while they addressed the audience of Multan and Sindh area using southwestern style. Thus, the variety of the Adi Granth language that we encounter in the works of the Gurus was primarily linked with its universal appeal and significance. In this context, Harjeet Singh Gill has made an important observation:

The phonetic transcription of the language of the Adi Granth has shown numerous variations in orthographic notations. It is due primarily to the fact that the language of this religious

discourse of the sixteenth century has a number of interacting linguistic registers and musical interpolations.

(Gill 2016: 10)

The Adi Granth is written in the newly developed *Gurmukhī* (“from the mouth of the Guru”) script that was a systematization of *laṇḍe/mahājānī* business shorthand, of the kind Guru Nanak doubtless used professionally as a young man. According to a marginal note on the opening folio of *Sāraṅg* mode in the second volume of the Goindval Pothis (folio 216), Guru Angad formulated the Gurmukhī script under the supervision of Guru Nanak for writing the Guru’s hymns (Mann 1996: 207). The standardization of the Gurmukhī script with the introduction of proper vowel-signs, however, took place during Guru Arjan’s period, a fact that is evident from the extant manuscripts written at that time. The usage of this new script in Sikh literary activities was an emphatic rejection of the superiority of Devanagari and Persian scripts (along with Sanskrit and Persian languages) and the hegemonic authority they represented in scholarly and religious circles. The use of the Gurmukhī script for Punjabi language gave a measure of distinction to the evolving Sikh tradition.

Central Themes of the *Guru Granth Sahib*

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the primary source for understanding the central themes, constituting the lifeworld of the Sikhs. A reading of its text shows that it has a thematic preoccupation with four major issues: (1) the conception of the divine Truth (*sach*), (2) the way to realize this Truth in one’s living experience, (3) describing those who have become truthful (*sachīār*) by realizing the divine Truth, and finally (4) encountering those who follow fake religiosity and practice falsehood in life. First, the Sikh scripture opens with an invocation to the Absolute One (*1-Oaṅkār*) in the preamble (*maṅgalācharaṇ*). Its text consists of different epithets of the Divine, all of which are characterizations of the Ultimate Reality derived from Guru Nanak’s personal experience depicted in his works. Each word in the preamble gains its meaning from its usage within the context of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and is thus peculiar to it and has meaning only as part of its discourse. Sikh tradition maintains that one cannot understand the meanings of any parts of the Sikh scripture without testing them on the touchstone of the preamble. At the same time, one cannot understand the preamble without an insightful understanding of the contents of the scripture since the whole is always greater than its parts.

The preamble provides us with the following succinct expression of the nature of the Ultimate Reality, acquiring the status of the fundamental statement of Sikh doctrine and praxis within the Sikh Panth:

“The Divine Is One” (*1-Oaṅkār*, “One, whose expression emerges as Primal Sound”), the True Name, the Creative Person, without fear and devoid of enmity, Timeless Form, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru. The Eternal Truth, from the beginning, through all time, present now, the Everlasting Reality.

(M1, *Japu*, GGS, p. 1)

By beginning with “One” (the original Punjabi text uses the numeral rather than the word), Guru Nanak emphasizes the singularity of the Divine. The numeral “1” affirms the oneness of divinity, the source as well as the goal of all that exists. It is important to note that the vital expression of the One is through the many, through the infinite plurality of the creation, as is evident from Guru

Arjan's saying, "Unity becomes plurality and plurality eventually becomes unity" (GGS 131). This understanding of Oneness in the Sikh tradition is completely different from the popular notion of "monotheism" in the Abrahamic traditions. Sikh doctrine invokes a Divine Reality that is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, personal and impersonal, universal and eternal, and both having and not having attributes. Guru Nanak designates the Divine as the Eternal Truth (*sach*), prevailing before the beginning of the Time, even before the beginning of the beginning, that continued to prevail throughout historical times. This sublime Truth is luminously present now and it shall continue to prevail in the absolute future, beyond time and space.

Second, Guru Nanak maintains that the realization of the divine Truth depends upon the ethical conduct of the seeker. He raises the opening question in his *Japu* as follows: "How is Truth to be attained, how the veil of falsehood torn aside?" The Guru then responds, "Nanak, thus it is written: Submit to the divine Order (*hukam*), walk in its way" (GGS 1). Truth obviously is not obtained by intellectual effort or cunning but only by personal commitment. To know Truth, one must live in it. An immoral person is neither worthy of being called a true seeker (*Sikh*) nor capable of attaining the spiritual goal of life. Any dichotomy between spiritual development and moral conduct is not approved in Sikh practice (*Sikhī*). In this context Guru Nanak explicitly says, "Truth is the highest virtue, but higher still is truthful living" (GGS 62). Indeed, truthful conduct (*sach achār*) is at the heart of the Guru's message. The only way to bring oneself into harmony with the divine Order is to eradicate ego or self-centeredness (*haumai*, "I-ness, my-ness") through the constant practice of meditation on the divine Name (*nām simaran*). A deeper understanding of the cosmic harmony, the cosmic rhythm, the cosmic order can enable us to comprehend the mystery of this universe (Gill 2019: 16).

Third, the one who has attained Truth becomes a truthful person (*sachiār*). Guru Nanak defined such a one as a *Gurmukh* ("one oriented towards the Guru") who practiced the threefold discipline of *nām-dān-ishnān*, "the divine Name, charity and purity" (GGS 942). Corresponding to the cognitive, the communal, and the personal aspects of the evolving Sikh identity, these three features – *nām* (relation to the Divine), *dān* (relation to the society), and *ishnān* (relation to self) – established a balance between the development of the individual and the society. The principal reason for Guru Nanak's journeys to various pilgrimage centers in India and abroad was his search for *Gurmukhs* who "trade in the merchandise of Truth" and "who carry others across the ocean of existence" (GGS 939). They become the role models for people in the development of an ideal society. Originally, the first Sikh families who gathered around Guru Nanak at Kartarpur formed the nucleus of the *Gurmukh Panth*, the community who followed his path to liberation from self-centeredness (*haumai*). The outsiders gave it the name of "Nanak Panth." Guru Nanak himself proclaimed that the "path of the *Gurmukh* is beyond worldly attachments" (GGS 360).

Finally, Guru Nanak maintained that the conceptual opposition between truth and falsehood cannot be resolved by mere empty rituals and fake religiosity. He strongly condemned contemporary religious leaders of Hindu, Muslim, and Nath traditions who practiced hypocrisy and falsehood: "The Muslim jurist (*qāzī*) tells lies and eats filth; the Brahmin kills and takes cleansing baths; the Yogi is blind and does not know the way. The three of them devise their own destruction" (GGS 662). In Punjabi culture, the phrase "to eat filth" referred to "unlawfully earned food" in those days when the *qāzī* used to take "bribes" to deprive people of justice (GGS 951). Guru Nanak frequently appreciated the Sufi path of love, although at times he offered his criticism of contemporary Sufi masters (*shaikhs*) for their subsistence on revenue-free land (*madad-i-mā'ash*) offered by the Muslim rulers (GGS 1286). From his own standpoint, the Guru considered dependence upon alms or begging degrading. He denounced those self-styled religious leaders of both Hindu and Muslim persuasions – *gurus* and *pirs* – who used to live on alms. For Guru Nanak, the true spiritual life required

that “one should live on what one has earned through hard work and that one should share with others the fruit of one’s exertion” (GGS 1245).

Religious Pluralism and the *Bhagat Bāṇī*

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence, in a single society, of multiple worldviews, some of which may be incompatible with one another. Its awareness has increased sharply in recent times with increasing urbanization, mass education, international migration, globalization, and advances in communication. Especially in democratic states that do not impose a single worldview, people of different faiths must learn how to live together harmoniously. As a matter of fact, acceptance of religious pluralism is a necessary condition of religious understanding and tolerance. The fact that religious pluralism requires dialogue and interaction provides opportunities for spiritual reflection and growth. In this context, the *Guru Granth Sahib* advocates the importance of keeping an open mind and being willing to learn from other traditions, while preserving the integrity of one’s own tradition.

The Sikh Gurus were strongly opposed to the claim of any tradition to possess the sole religious truth. A spirit of accommodation has always been an integral part of the Sikh attitude towards other religious traditions. The inclusion of the works of 15 non-Sikh poet-saints (*bhagats*) in the *Guru Granth Sahib* provides us with a four-point theory of religious pluralism. First, participants in interfaith dialogue must recognize that the religious commitment of others are no less absolute than their own. Therefore, the quest for a universal religion must be abandoned, along with any attempt to place one religious tradition above others. Second, the doctrinal standpoints of different religious traditions must be maintained with mutual respect and dignity. For instance, the Muslim voice of Shaikh Farid (1173–1265) can express itself freely on matters of doctrine and practice in the foundational text of the Sikh tradition. Third, interfaith dialogue requires an open attitude, one that allows for recognition of the points on which different religious traditions agree, but also disagreement on crucial points of doctrine. Finally, one must be willing to let the “other” become one’s “self” so that the person’s life is enriched by the spiritual experience. Thus, the presence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the Sikh scripture offers an excellent example of intertextuality that may be useful in cross-cultural studies. It can also offer its distinctive contribution to the study of human interaction in a rapidly growing era of globalization (Pashaura Singh 2020: 1384–1385).

Multiple Translations and Interpretations of the Sikh Scripture

Recent scholarship has conceptualized world literature through the circulation and distribution of texts in translation, through patterns of aesthetic expression that stay local or acquire global currency, through a world-system of center-peripheral economic and political relations, and through pedagogical practices in the US classrooms (Mani 2017: 26). In this context, translations of original text in different languages play an important role. Here, I do not intend to discuss the issue of how Orientalists used the project of translation as a tool of colonial rule by creating a vision of Indian religions, culture, and society that the colonialists could use to manipulate and control the general public, despite the remoteness of this vision from contemporaneous religious, cultural, and social realities (Nemec 2009: 762–763). For instance, the British administration was anxious to learn more about the Sikhs, and for this reason, Ernest Trumpp was commissioned to translate the *Adi Granth* from beginning to end. This project was part of the colonial agenda, although Trumpp failed miserably in his objective by publishing only an incomplete and imperfect translation of the *Adi Granth* in 1877. We are also aware how M.A. Macauliffe undertook his monumental work *The Sikh Religion*

(1909) in six volumes to “make some reparation to the Sikhs for the insults which he [Trumpp] offered to their Gurus and their religion” (Macauliffe [1909] 1985, vol. 1, vii). Notwithstanding the issue of the politics of cultural translation, I want to briefly mention the usefulness of the translation of the Sikh scripture in different languages for providing access to those who do not know the original language of the text.

There are numerous full translations of the *Guru Granth Sahib* available in English by Gopal Singh (1960), Manmohan Singh (1962–1969), G.S. Talib (1985), P.S. Chahil (1993), G.S. Makin (2000), and Darshan Singh (2005). Unsurprisingly, the digital environment has enabled the *Guru Granth Sahib* to become accessible in English translation and transliteration to serve the needs of those who are not brought up with sufficient proficiency in Punjabi. In this context, an English translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* by Sant Singh Khalsa (1995), an American Sikh of Yogi Bajan’s 3HO (“Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization”) movement, has become extremely popular. The late Dr. Jarnail Singh of Canada translated the entire text of the Sikh scripture in both French and German languages. The text of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is also available in Hindi and Urdu languages, and a current project is underway to translate it in 13 prominent Indian languages, such as Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Sindhi, Malayalam, and Sanskrit (Pashaura Singh 2020: 1385–1386).

The more canonical a text, the greater amount of attention it receives in its interpretation. It is no wonder that the *Adi Granth* text has an inexhaustible hermeneutic potential. No matter how much one studies and interprets it, the deeper aspects of its meaning remain yet to be fathomed. Each generation of scholars has tried to unfold its meaning from its own angle. Anyone schooled in the history of *Adi Granth* interpretation can easily identify the intellectual context in which almost any extensive sample of interpretation was produced. In fact, scriptural interpretation has styles that reflect clearly and distinctly the cultures and contexts of individual interpreters, the schools they represent, and the creative worlds in which they worked, including their cutting-edge ideas, interpretive skills, fads, and even erroneous beliefs. There are no predetermined meanings but only actual meanings determined by larger social and political contexts. The least one can say is to assert that narratives are “meanings in motion.” Indeed, the dynamic nature and plurality of interpretations have remained part and parcel of Sikh tradition throughout its history (Pashaura Singh 2000: 239–261; Shackle 2008: 255–277). The *Adi Granth* will have future meanings too, meanings which have yet to be determined.

Verne A. Dusenbery has categorized two different hermeneutic approaches to understand the inspired words of the *Adi Granth*. One approach places emphasis on the “meaning” of textual words by following what is called “dualistic understanding” of language. The dualistic ideology of language “privileges reference, semantic meaning, the arbitrariness of signifier and signified, and the context-free cognitive qualities of the text at the expense of the sound properties of the words themselves” (Dusenbery 1992: 389). The *Singh Sabha* scholars adopted this approach to scriptural interpretation that was primarily guided by the rationalistic influence of Western education. It is normally understood to reflect the “modernist perspective” based on the scientific paradigm of the Enlightenment. The second hermeneutic approach is generally known as “non-dualistic understanding” of language. It is a “context-sensitive” approach and is linked to the practical efforts of “reading, listening and singing” the hymns of the scripture. Because of its association with performative practices, it is called the “hermeneutics of praxis.” It recognizes “the material as well as cognitive properties of language (especially articulated speech) and refuses to privilege semantico-referential meaning at the expense of other properties that language is thought to possess” (Dusenbery 1992: 388–389).

Indeed, sonic form itself is regarded as sacred and listening to sacred sound as transcendental. The non-dualistic ideology, therefore, places great emphasis on the sacredness of the “sound” of the

scriptural words. According to this approach, the sacred sounds of *gurbāṇī* have transformative power only if they are replicated exactly as they were first enunciated by the Sikh Gurus. That is why the hymns of the Adi Granth are sung in ragas in the central devotional practice of *kīrtan* (“sacred singing”) in Sikhism. In devotional singing, the Guru’s hymns gain their full evocative power in the aesthetic experience of both performers and listeners (Pashaura Singh 2008a: 671). The oral experience of scripture has received much attention in recent scholarship. Both scholars and common people are now involved in a process in which they try to recapture the spirit of “personalism” that has been lost in the transition away from oral/aural language. Not surprisingly, the dualistic hermeneutic approach has come under fire in a postmodern critique of context-free objective scholarship. For instance, A.K. Ramanujan’s critique of Western hermeneutics is the case in point (Ramanujan 1999: 34–51). For a long time, he argues, Western scholarly approaches to South Asian cultural and religious traditions tended to omit the complex structure of performative practices. These approaches were mainly preoccupied with a “context-free” hermeneutic analysis that would not lend itself to “context-sensitive” forms of cultural practice and narrative tradition. However, Dusenbery has demonstrated that the Sikh experience implicitly challenges analytic dichotomies that rigidly oppose oral and written texts, or sound and meaning, or that which foresees an inevitable evolutionary movement between them (Dusenbery 1992: 387).

Scholars and lay people have successfully applied both dualistic and non-dualistic hermeneutic approaches in actual practice in understanding the message of the Adi Granth. Even the Gurus themselves placed greater emphasis on the understanding of the meaning of *gurbāṇī* rather than the mindless “ritualization” of religious practice. Therefore, both informative and performative practices occupy the central place in Sikh hermeneutics. Each act of hermeneutic encounter with the Adi Granth text is unique because it is the encounter with the eternal Guru as disclosed in it. Thus, it is the text that illumines the interpreter like radiance, not the interpreter who illumines the text. In order to appreciate this phenomenon, we need to investigate Paul Ricoeur’s magical looking-glass theory of textual meaning. He asserts that the meaning of the text does not lie behind it, in the region of intention and ostensive reference, but in front of it in the space of interpretation (Ricoeur 1981: 141). For the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is new every morning. As a living force in their lives, it has functioned as an ever-fresh source of timeless truth. While reading it or listening to its contents, the Sikhs have heard the voice of *Akāl Purakh* (“Eternal One,” Sikh concept of the divine being analogous to “God”), the eternal Guru, speaking directly to them there and then. It is no wonder that ritual purity is observed in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. One is in the presence of the eternal Guru when one is engaging with the text of the *Guru Granth Sahib*: to see, to touch, and to hear it.

Scriptural Authority

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the basis of the most important Sikh doctrines, performative practices, rituals, and social and ethical positions. It is at the center of every important Sikh life cycle ritual: (1) naming a child at birth by opening the scripture at random to get the first letter of the name to give a Sikh identity to the newborn; (2) performing the Sikh wedding ceremony in which the bride and groom circumambulate the sacred scripture four times, once for each of their four vows; (3) performing the Khalsa initiation ceremony (*amrit sanskār*) in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, in which the Cherished Five (*pañj piāre*) initiate the novice with sweetened water (*amrit*) stirred with a double-edged sword and sanctified by the recitation of five liturgical prayers; and finally, (4) performing the death ceremony in which hymns from the *Guru Granth Sahib* are sung both in the period preceding the cremation of the dead body and in the post-cremation rites, followed by a

reading of the entire scripture at home, or gurdwara, with a “completion ceremony” (*bhog*), during which final prayers are offered in memory of the deceased.

Simply to be in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or to hear a sentence read aloud from it, makes Sikhs feel that they are on sacred ground. The most significant point in the Sikh experience of accepting the scripture as living Guru may be seen in the practice of “receiving the Guru’s Word” (*vāk laiṇā*). The procedure functions in a liturgical fashion of opening the scripture at random. During the process, the first hymn at the top of the left-hand page (or when a hymn begins on the preceding page as usually is the case, one turns back to its beginning) is read aloud as the proclamation of the Guru’s commandment for that moment or situation in life. It is then appropriated by the audience through devoutly “hearing.” Each day early in the morning thousands of devotees gather at the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar to listen to the Guru’s *vāk*, and each one of them derives from the same hymn a message suitable to one’s level and degree of understanding. In fact, the daily *vāk* proclaimed at the Golden Temple may now be heard or viewed from anywhere in the world with the use of Internet sources through electronic media.

In sum, the place and function of the Adi Granth as Guru has inspired Sikhs throughout their history in personal piety, liturgy, ceremonies, and communal solidarity. It has provided a framework for the shaping of the Panth and has been a decisive factor in shaping a distinctive Sikh identity, promising to be the touchstone in the twenty-first century. It even enjoys the textual hegemony over the secondary Sikh scripture, the *Dasam Granth*, which contains the works attributed to the tenth (*dasam*) Guru, Gobind Singh. Thus, the ultimate authority within the Sikh tradition, for a wide range of personal and public conduct, lies in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. In a certain sense, the Sikhs have taken their conception of sacred scripture farther than other “text-centered communities” such as Jews and Muslims.

Acknowledgements

All the citations from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are taken from the standard version of the 1430-page text. For instance, “GGs 1291” refers to the citation on page 1291 of the standard volume. In the extended scriptural references, the code word “M” [*Mahallā*, “King”] with an appropriate number is used for the Sikh Gurus. The translations are my own but sometimes adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa’s online version of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

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4

THE *DASAM GRANTH*

Robin Rinehart

Introduction

The *Dasam Granth*, or “Book of the Tenth [Guru],” also called the “*Dasve Pātshāh dā Granth*,” or “Book of the Tenth Emperor,” is an anthology of compositions attributed to Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708). The *Dasam Granth*’s contents, history, and reception are powerful lenses through which to explore ongoing discourse among Sikhs and scholars about the nature of Sikhi, from the development of Sikh tradition during Guru Gobind Singh’s reign as Guru, through the eighteenth-century era of the Sikh *misals* and kingdoms, British colonial rule, independent India, to the rise of the global Sikh diaspora and the Internet age. To many Sikhs, the *Dasam Granth* is indisputably the work of Guru Gobind Singh; others term some portions of it the work of poets in Guru Gobind Singh’s court, or even as the work of “enemies of Sikhism.”¹ Still others lament the ongoing disputes and plead for unity in the Sikh Panth, at times expressing the view that the controversy is overblown. One need only search online for the answer to a question such as “did Guru Gobind Singh write the Dasam Granth” to find a wealth of passionate discussions. There are many videos of *Dasam Granth kīrtan* available online, indicating its important role in Sikh devotional practice, but the accompanying comments sections are at times fiercely combative, other times simply locked by moderators. Wikipedia entries related to the *Dasam Granth* are edited frequently to reflect differing viewpoints; in May 2019, for example, one mention included the assertion that “the dasam Granth was written by certain brahmins in collusion with british mixing in real gurbani to make it seem real [sic]” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhai_Mani_Singh). While there is a steadily growing body of research on the history of text itself, the historical context within which it was composed and compiled, and the text’s subsequent reception and usage, its overall status nonetheless remains controversial, in part because the ongoing debates about the *Dasam Granth* encompass sensitive issues of community definition and the delineation of boundaries between Hinduism and Sikhism.

The *Dasam Granth* covers a range of topics, from verses offering praise to a formless, limitless God, an autobiographical passage that places Guru Gobind Singh within the lineage of the solar dynasty of kings that includes Ram, retellings of stories from the epics and Puranas, and verses that invoke the power of weapons, to its longest section, a series of stories about the complexity of human relationships, especially those between women and men. Some compositions mention the date they were completed, and it seems that the majority of them date to the 1680s and 1690s, composed

during Guru Gobind Singh's stays at Paonta and Anandpur, with the exception of the *Zafarnāmā*, which may be dated to 1705.

A complete standard print edition of the *Dasam Granth* is 1,428 pages, though there are additional compositions found in some manuscripts. As such, it is two pages shy of the 1,430 pages of the standard edition of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which some Sikhs take as emblematic of its status – important, but not quite on the same level as the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Most of the *Dasam Granth* is in Brajbhāṣā, with one Punjabi composition (*Vār Durgā Kī*) and two in Persian (*Zafarnāmā* and *Hikāūtān*). The text uses a vast range of different meters and poetic styles (Ashta 1959). Shorter selections from it, with select verses or compositions, are widely available, especially those that are used in Sikh liturgy. The SGPC, for example, publishes a selection of passages from the *Dasam Granth* called *Das Granthī*. There are many Punjabi and Hindi commentaries and translations. No complete English translation has been published as yet, though there are widely available translations of select passages and verses from its most famous compositions (see Kohli 2005), as well as of verses relating to the most vexing questions about the text. Given the challenges of the text's language, as well as its sheer length and breadth, many Sikhs are likely to have firsthand knowledge of only select portions of the *Dasam Granth*.

The Compositions of the *Dasam Granth*

Jāp Sāhib [Revered Recitation]

While undated, *Jāp Sāhib* is generally considered one of Guru Gobind Singh's earliest compositions, and his authorship is rarely disputed. Its title, “*jāp*,” suggests its parallels to the Guru Nanak composition that opens the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Jap Jī*, both referring to prayerful recitation or repetition of the divine names. *Jāp Sāhib* is often recited in the morning and also used as part of initiation into the Khalsa.

Its 199 alliterative, rhythmic verses praise and pay homage to a formless and ultimately indescribable god who creates and destroys all that exists, offering reverence to the supreme god who rules over all other gods and beings. The opening stanza includes the Sanskrit phrase “*neti neti*” or “not this, not this,” a means of indicating that the supreme reality cannot fully be expressed in words. Many of the verses continue this theme of negation – God is nameless, formless, timeless, his mystery beyond the knowledge of sacred texts of Hindus and Muslims, yet also merciful and benevolent.

Akāl Ustat [Praise of the Timeless]

As in many other *Dasam Granth* compositions, in these 272 verses, God is extolled as *akāl purakh*, the timeless being, and praised with other epithets such as “all-steel” [*sarab loh*] and infinite form [*anahad rūp*]. The goddess finds refuge at his feet; deities such as Brahma and Vishnu cannot fathom his limitless form, and he is creator and destroyer of all.

Bacitra Nāṭak/Bacitra Nāṭak Granth [Book of the Wondrous Drama]

This portion of the *Dasam Granth* includes a series of compositions that may be read together as an exploration of the nature of cosmic order, or *dharma*, emphasizing the relationship between *dharma* as monitored by the supreme deity throughout the cosmos, and at the earthly level by the king and the Guru. The “*nāṭak*,” or “drama” of the title is best understood as similar to the concept of *līlā*, or

divine play. *Bacitra Nāṭak Granth* opens with a composition itself called “*Bacitra Nāṭak*” that includes “*Apnī Kathā*,” or “My Story,” a partial account of Guru Gobind Singh’s life.

Bacitra Nāṭak

The first chapter of *Bacitra Nāṭak* opens with salutations to the sword and praises God [Kāl] as limitless and indescribable, a weapon-bearing warrior, the creator of the Vedas, Puranas, and Qur’an, the defeater of demons, slayer of Vishnu’s incarnations, and the god who brought forth Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, and others. The verses also salute weapons such as the arrow, gun, sword, mace, and lance. The portion titled “*Apnī Kathā*” begins in the second chapter, with verses praising the lord, then detailing Guru Gobind Singh’s place in the *Sūraj vamsa*, or solar dynasty. It relates that Ram and Sita’s sons, Lav and Kush, established and ruled over the cities of Lahore and Kasur, though later, their descendants fought one another. Lav’s descendants were victorious and ruled their kingdom, while those of Kush who survived went to Kashi for Vedic learning. As a result, they were known as Bedis. A later king sought to heal the family rift and invited the Bedis back to the Punjab. Lav’s descendants then retired to the forest, leaving the Bedis to take over rule, and the new king prophesied that he would be reborn in the Kaliyuga as Nanak. But the Bedis too lost their kingdom amidst strife and disputes, while Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras did the work of other varnas rather than their own.

The Bedis’ territory shrank to just 20 villages, and they became farmers. When Guru Nanak was born into the Bedi clan, he propagated *dharma*, as did the next eight gurus, each of whom is named and described briefly. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth, sacrificed his life for *dharma*, defending the *tilak*, or forehead mark, and the sacred thread.

Next, the poet explains, he will relate his own story, or “*apnī kathā*.” While deep in meditation, with no desire to take birth, the lord Kāl commanded him to do so, explaining that though he had created various gods, they all grew egotistical, as did humans. Gorakh, Ramanand, Muhammad – each consumed by ego and self-regard, wished to start his own path. Kāl commanded Guru Gobind Singh to spread *dharma*. The poet then explains that he was born in Patna and later brought to the Punjab. When he assumed his leadership role [*rāj-sāj*], he worked to promulgate *dharma* and also enjoyed sports such as hunting.

A neighboring ruler grew angry with him, leading to a battle, which the Guru won. He then established the town of Anandpur. There were some peaceful years but also further clashes with local rulers, brought on by disputes among Mughal officials and the local rulers in the Punjab hills. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb sent his son to the Punjab, causing some to flee, and a series of verses condemns those who fled rather than fight on the Guru’s side. “*Apnī Kathā*” covers events until sometime in the early 1690s but does not describe the 1699 establishment of the Khalsa in 1699 or any later events.

The battles depicted in “*Apnī Kathā*” introduce themes that recur in narratives of battles between the gods and demons related throughout the *Dasam Granth*. The sights and sounds of warfare are depicted in gory detail – frightful ghoul and vampire-like beings savor the blood spilled, and Shiva’s deep meditative concentration is broken by the warriors’ shrieks. “*Apnī Kathā*” closes with verses praising the Lord who protects good people and destroys the wicked.

The Goddess Caṇḍī

The *Bacitra Nāṭak Granth* includes three separate compositions that detail the story of the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī and her role in maintaining cosmic order and the power of the gods when demons have usurped it. Focusing on Durgā’s battles against these demons, these compositions, differing in

style, length, imagery, and language, relate roughly the same series of events as the *Devī Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. They are frequently termed as “translations” of the *Devī Māhātmya* but may more accurately be understood as retellings.

“*Caṇḍī Caritra Ukti Bilās*” [Enjoyment of the Recitation of Caṇḍī’s Deeds] is the first and longest of the three. The story opens, after salutations to the primal lord, with a depiction of Vishnu’s long slumber, during which the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha emerge from his ear. Vishnu fights these demons for 5,000 years, when finally, they tell him he can request a boon, and they agree to surrender their bodies to him. Next, however, the demon Mahīśāsura makes his appearance and usurps the gods’ powers. They pay their respects to the goddess Durgā, also called Caṇḍī and Caṇḍikā, and she prepares to battle him and his forces. Like many other *Dasam Granth* compositions, this goddess story is in part a display of poetic virtuosity, using words as “pleasurable gems.” As in the many other battle stories of the *Dasam Granth*, the sights and sounds of violent conflict are described in graphic, evocative imagery and likened to auspicious scenes. Rivers and oceans of blood flow, the rivulets of blood are compared to Rama’s offering of water to the sun; gushing bloodstains wounded warriors’ clothing as if it were dyed during the festival of Holi. Durgā defeats Mahīśāsura, and Indra’s kingship is restored, but then the demons Sumbh and Nisumbh besiege Indra’s citadel. As Indra is forced to retreat, Chandi manifests herself, and then the goddess Kālī emerges from Caṇḍī’s forehead. In a series of subsequent battles, Caṇḍī and Kālī slay the remaining demons, including Raktabīja, the demon who creates a new version of himself with each drop of his blood that is spilled. Vishnu and the gods send their powers, or *saktis*, to assist in the battle. Finally, Kālī and the *saktis* merge into Caṇḍī, and she picks Shumbh up like Krishna lifting Mount Gobardhan, slicing him cleanly in two. The gods praise and propitiate her, their rightful reign reestablished. The story closes with verses of supplication in which the poet asks that he not fear his enemies in battle, and that he die fighting, and proclaims that the goddess will grant the wishes of those who read or listen to her story.

The narrative of *Caṇḍī Caritra II* outlines the same series of events. Its battle verses mention not only the usual weaponry of swords and arrows but also rifles [*tupak*]. Here, the goddess’s power is emphasized – she is the source of Shiva, Indra, Brahma, Yama, Hanuman, and Krishna’s power. The composition closes with two chapters paying homage to her many manifestations and powers and the benefits that accrue those who recite her deeds.

Vār Sīt Durgā Kī (“The Ballad of Durgā”), the third goddess composition, is also known by the titles *Vār Sīt Bhagautī Jī Kī* and *Caṇḍī dī Vār*. In Punjabi rather than Braj, it is the shortest of the three. Unlike the first two, which mention only Durgā and the demons she slew, this composition opens with verses praising the first nine Sikh gurus. This opening section forms part of the Sikh prayer of *ardās*, recited morning and evening, and to begin various rituals.

The following verses praise the lord who created Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, who created Durgā, and whose power enabled Ram to defeat Ravana, and Krishna to defeat the wicked king Kamsa. The third verse proclaims that the lord created the demons to remove the gods’ pride [*abhimān*]. This is a noteworthy theme that occurs elsewhere in the *Dasam Granth* – namely, it acknowledges gods and avatars who are primarily associated with Hindu mythology but highlights their weaknesses as pride and self-regard. It may also be linked thematically with the account of the solar dynasty given in *Apnī Kathā*, in which Rama’s descendants fight and eventually lose their territory, with dharam being restored only with the advent of Guru Nanak and the other Sikh gurus.

In relating the tales of the series of demons slain by the goddess, the poet of *Vār Durgā Kī* at times uses Islamic imagery and Perso-Arabic vocabulary. The demon Raktabīja is attended by houris [*hūrān*; heavenly beings in Islamic theology]; warriors stand firm like minarets; Durgā’s warriors marched ahead of her like pilgrims going on hajj to Mecca. Here, too, the warriors fight with swords and arrows, but also guns [*tuphang*]. The closing verse proclaims that those who sing this tale will not be reborn.

Giān Prabodh [The Awakening of Knowledge]

This is a 336-stanza composition that begins with praises to God and then relates a conversation between a soul [*ātma*] and the supreme soul [*paramātmā*] about the soul's true nature. It then moves on to a series of stories, familiar from the Mahabharata, about kings, their lineages, and the sacrificial rituals they sponsored. It also discusses the proper responsibilities of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Sudras, and Vaishyas. There are many verses that refer to different types of learning, from philosophy to warfare, and different languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Persian. Some commentators have concluded that *Giān Prabodh* may be incomplete and/or an inadvertent combination of what were meant to be two separate works (see, e.g., Jaggi 1966: p. 83).

Caubīs Avatār [The Twenty-Four Avatars]

One of the lengthiest *Dasam Granth* compositions, this is an exposition of the exploits of 24 of Vishnu's avatars. The first five, the fish, tortoise, Nara, Nārāyana, and Mahāmohinī (a female avatar), are involved in the churning of the milk ocean. Later avatars include Brahma, Rudra, Jalandhar, and Arhant Dev, who starts Jainism so that sacrifices will be stopped and thereby weaken demon kings empowered by the sacrificial offerings. Other avatars include Manu, Dhanvantar, Sūraj, Candra, Ram, Krishna, Nara (Arjuna), the Buddha, and Kalki. The greatest attention is devoted to Krishna, Ram, and Kalki; the Buddha avatar story is only four verses long. The Kalki story concludes with Vishnu creating yet another avatar named Mīr Mahdī to slay Kalki because he had become prideful. Mīr Mahdī himself is then overcome by pride and self-regard, and Vishnu slays him as well. Thus, as in other Vishnu avatar traditions, figures associated with other *dharmas* (Buddhism, Jainism, and here Islam, with a *mahdī*, or redeemer/messiah figure) are incorporated. Both the Ram and Krishna avatar stories include frequently cited verses in which the poet proclaims his reverence for the lord Kāl, but not the avatars themselves.

Brahmā Avatār

The deeds of seven avatars of Brahmā are presented here. The first are Bālmik [Valmiki, composer of the Ramayana], the Vedic sage Kaśap [Kaśyapa], Sukra [Śukra, who manifested at a time that demon kings ruled the earth], and Baces/Bāces [Brahmapati], here described very briefly as having a role in Indra's defeat of demons. Next is Biās [Vyāsā], the legendary composer of eighteen Puranas and the Mahabharata; his story also includes accounts of a number of kings. The sixth incarnation is six different sages made up of parts of the fifth avatar Vyāsā, created when Kāl saw that he had become too proud, and divided him into six parts, each of whom composed a *sāstra*. Finally, the seventh avatar of Brahmā is the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa. In explaining that Kāl decided to divide Vyāsā into six different figures, the *Dasam Granth* yet again highlights the failings of avatars that result due to their pride.

Rudra Avatāra

Rudra Avatāra outlines the deeds of two avatars of Rudra, or Siva: Datta (Dattatreya, master of renunciation and yoga; this story also recounts the deeds of 23 gurus), and Pārasnāth, a great king and sage who worships the goddess and discourses with the yogic master Matsyendranāth.

The compositions that comprise the *Bachitra Nāṭak Granth* are often characterized as "Puranic" by commentators due to their focus on royal lineages, avatars, gods, goddesses, demons, and their

battles (see, e.g., Jaggi 1965). As such, they figure in the controversy regarding the authorship of the *Dasam Granth*, for some Sikh commentators believe that these “Hindu” stories are not appropriate in a Sikh text and therefore cannot be Guru Gobind Singh’s compositions. Others explain that the stories are didactic and inspirational for warriors and that they highlight the shortcomings of Hindu deities and avatars so should not be seen as an endorsement of them.

Sabad Hazāre

Sabad Hazare is a collection of ten *sabads*, or hymns, that focus on issues such as self-control, moderation, detachment from anger and greed, and the importance of remembering the divine Name. These verses also deem the Vedas, Puranas, and Qur’an as limited in scope and rituals as largely ineffective. One very famous and poignant *sabad* is understood to have been composed by Guru Gobind Singh after the tragic loss of all four of his sons.

Savaiye

The 33 *savaiye* (a *savaiya* is a particular type of verse) praise God and also mention the true Khalsa. As elsewhere in the *Dasam Granth*, the remembrance of God’s name is praised as more effective than ritual or austerities. One of the *savaiyas* is typically read as a critique of the masands.

***Khālsā Mahimā* [“Praise of the Khalsa”]**

This is a brief composition in which the narrator assures a frustrated Brahman that he will receive gifts. It is generally interpreted to be Guru Gobind Singh’s statement about why gifts were given to Sikhs rather than to Brahmans after a sacrifice to the goddess at Naina Devi.

***Sastra-nām-mālā* [“Garland of the Names of Weapons”]**

The title is reminiscent of the common *stotra*, or praise genre, of Indic literature of the *sahasranāma*, except that rather than focusing on the names and attributes of a deity, these verses invoke the material might of weapons, as well as their spiritual and cosmic powers. The opening lines praise God as the creator of the world, as well as different philosophical paths and disputes. The weapons praised and invoked include different types of swords, arrow, noose, and discus, daggers, maces, spears, and rifles [*tupak*], with multiple names and invocations presented for each.

***Zafarnāmā* [“Letter of Victory”]**

The *Zafarnāmā* is a Persian epistle, composed in 1705, much later than the rest of the *Dasam Granth*. It is Guru Gobind Singh’s eloquent and erudite missive to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, calling him to task for breaking an oath. Unlike parts of the *Dasam Granth* deemed “Puranic,” there is virtually no disagreement that it was indeed authored by Guru Gobind Singh.

***Hikāitān* [“Stories”]**

Also in Persian, this is a series of 12 stories similar in content to those in *Caritropākhiān* (indeed, several are Persian versions of stories also found there).

Caritropākhiān [Stories About Character]

This is the *Dasam Granth*'s longest and most controversial composition, roughly 40% of the standard print edition. It includes 404 *caritras*, here best understood as character sketches. The opening story includes praise of the goddess and accounts of her battles with demons, similar to and indeed longer than the other goddess passages in the *Dasam Granth*. There is a frame story about a king who enlisted a minister to educate his son after the king's new wife tried to seduce her stepson but then accused him of assaulting her. The minister counseled the king to be wary of the wiles of women, and then, over many days, related the various *caritras*. These include popular romances and folktales such as Layla and Majnun, and Hīr and Rānjhā, vignettes concerning historical figures such as the Mughal emperor Jahangir and his wife, Nur Jahan, tales of women who disguise themselves as men and fight valiantly in battle, and most of all, women who devise a dizzying array of schemes to outwit and seduce men. Some *caritras* are quite explicit in their depiction of sexual liaisons. There is a series of *caritras* that some interpreters consider an account of an incident in Guru Gobind Singh's life, when a woman sought unsuccessfully to seduce a ruler [*rāt*] (others, however, believe that the events described are not keeping with the character of the Guru). Religious leaders, from kazis to pandits, are generally portrayed as prideful yet not particularly bright. The lengthy closing *caritra* details battles between gods and demons and includes the verses that form the daily prayer of protection known as *Bentī Chaupāī*. There is no conclusion to the frame story.

Additional Compositions

There are additional compositions found in some *Dasam Granth* manuscripts but not included in the standard print edition (see Jaggi 1966; Singh and Mann 2015).

The Compilation of the Dasam Granth

While some compositions within the *Dasam Granth* mention the date on which they were completed, there is less certainty about when the text as a whole came about. A number of sources from the early eighteenth-century mention Guru Gobind Singh's compositions as well as his court poets, but these references do not provide a consistent or complete history of the text. Sikh historiography has generally credited the *Dasam Granth*'s compilation to Bhai Mani Singh (d. 1738), the renowned Sikh scholar who prepared the final recension of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in 1706 under Guru Gobind Singh's direction. However, Guru Gobind Singh, a gifted and accomplished poet, chose not to include any of his compositions in this final recension of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Saināpati, a poet in Guru Gobind Singh's court, did not refer to a compilation of Guru Gobind Singh's writings in his 1711 *Sri Gur Sobha*, nor did Kuir Singh in his 1751 *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*. Kesar Singh Chhibbar's 1769 *Bansāvalīnāmā* twice mentions that Guru Gobind Singh was asked why he did not include his own verses with those of the earlier Sikh gurus, and that the Guru replied that his own compositions were "play." *Bansāvalīnāmā* also notes that Guru Gobind Singh completed his own *granth*, or book, in 1698 and mentions both a "large *granth*" that was lost around 1701 as well as a small *granth* that included the "*Avatār Līlā*." According to Chhibbar, Bhai Mani Singh later recovered some of this material and compiled a *granth* that included both the *Adi Granth* and Guru Gobind Singh's compositions. But these references do not provide complete clarity on what specific compositions were involved, and some Sikh scholars have questioned the accuracy of Chhibbar's chronicling.

Other eighteenth-century sources provide accounts of Guru Gobind Singh spending time each day both composing and translating poetry, but also of the poets in his court composing poetry and

of pandits whom the Guru directed to compile information from the Vedas, Puranas, and other sources. There are also references to materials lost in times of travel and turbulence, lending some credence to the argument that some original version of the text was lost and later reconstructed.

Sikh commentators debating the *Dasam Granth's* authenticity use evidence from these eighteenth-century sources to support competing claims about authorship. Descriptions of Guru Gobind Singh spending time composing poetry bolster the arguments of those who consider him the author of the entire text, while references to his court poets are cited as evidence by those who believe that these poets who composed some of the *Dasam Granth*. There are verses throughout the *Dasam Granth* in which the poet uses the names Rām, Siām, and Kāl; some take this to confirm that they are the work of court poets, but others have argued that these were pennames used by Guru Gobind Singh. The phrase “*sī mukhṛvāk pātsāhī das*” (“the revered words of the 10th emperor”), which occurs at the beginning of some *Dasam Granth* compositions, is taken as evidence that he did compose those works that include this phrase or, alternatively, is not seen as definitive on the grounds that anyone could write that phrase on a manuscript. Other evidence used to bolster particular arguments includes a letter dated from 1716 from Bhai Mani Singh to Guru Gobind Singh's widow, Mata Sundari. Some see it as a later forgery, others as evidence confirming that the Guru did compose the text.

Connections between events in Guru Gobind Singh's life and aspects of the *Dasam Granth* are also adduced as evidence for competing claims about the text. Biographies of the Guru note that he was well-versed in several languages and often composed poetry; some argue that this supports the view that he composed the *Dasam Granth*; others point to inconsistencies and apparent errors in the texts (for example, in the chronology of events also related in the Puranas) and argue that therefore he could not have composed some parts of it because he would not have made such errors. Similar tactics are taken using information about the battles the Guru and his forces fought and their movement to several different locations and the likelihood that written materials were lost in such moves.

The *Dasam Granth* Controversy

In the eighteenth century, with the rise of the Sikh kingdoms, there is evidence that the *Dasam Granth*, then more commonly known as the *Dasve Pātsāh kā Granth*, was in wide circulation, installed in gurdwaras alongside (but lower than) the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and regularly recited. Writing in the early nineteenth century, historian John Malcolm (1981: 40–41) described the *Dasam Granth* as being “at least as much revered” as the *Guru Granth Sahib*. As is still the case, Sikhs used verses from the *Dasam Granth* in their daily prayers and as part of Khalsa initiation rites. Although some eighteenth-century sources show that divergent views on the *Dasam Granth* were a factor in varying views on Sikh identity and politics, it was after the Punjab came under British rule in 1849 that debates about the *Dasam Granth* became especially prominent. This is in large part due to the growing influence of the Singh Sabha movement, some branches of which sought to establish clear lines between Hindu and Sikh practice. It is not surprising that in such a context, some Sikh thinkers might question the extensive treatment of “Hindu” mythology in the *Dasam Granth*, particularly those sections deemed “Puranic.”

Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha (1861–1938), the influential Sikh scholar who authored the 1898 tract *Ham Hindū Nahīn* [“We Are Not Hindus”], a classic statement of Singh Sabha ideology, relates in *Mahān Kosh* that, after Bhai Mani Singh's death, Sikh leaders pondered over whether to preserve the compilation that he had prepared. The *Mahān Kosh* entry mentions particular concern over the content of *Caritropakhian* and the *Hikāitān*. This story reflects another frequently debated aspect of

the *Dasam Granth*, the at times graphic nature of some of the *caritras*. The content of the *caritras* and the extensive retelling of Hindu mythological material remain points of contention.

The standard printed edition of the *Dasam Granth* is based on the work of the Sodhak Committee, established by the Gurmat Granth Pracharak Sabha and published in an 1897 report. The committee consulted over 30 manuscripts, though not necessarily the oldest, because their effort was focused on standardizing the text for recitation more than establishing authorship definitively. Some scholars have looked to further manuscript research to clarify the *Dasam Granth*'s status. In this regard, Rattan Singh Jaggi's 1965 Hindi book, *Dasam Granth kī Paurāṇik Pr̥ṣṭhabhūmi* ["The Puranic Background of the Dasam Granth"] and his 1966 Punjabi book, *Dasam Granth dā Kartritav* ["The Composition of the Dasam Granth"], are both noteworthy (Rinehart 2011: 41–43). Jaggi analyzed what he considered to be the four earliest manuscripts available. He concluded that Guru Gobind Singh composed only some portions of the *Dasam Granth* and that the "Puranic" material was largely the work of court poets. More recently, Kamalroop Singh and Gurinder Singh Mann (2015), both UK-based researchers, have argued that the manuscript research, including Jaggi's work, has been too limited and that consultation of a wider range of manuscripts, particularly those from outside the Punjab, provides a more thorough picture and lends credence to the view that Guru Gobind Singh composed the entire text, including some compositions that are not included in the standard print edition. Singh and Mann (2015: 173–175) also highlight the significance of the *Dasam Granth* (and the *Sarabloh Granth*) among Nihang Sikhs.

The *Dasam Granth* controversy grew especially heated in the 2000s with the publications of some Sikh authors in both India and the diaspora arguing vehemently against the authenticity of the majority of its contents. This, along with other disputes about Sikh practice, led to proclamations from the Akal Takht, such as a 2000 request that Sikhs not comment publicly on the *Dasam Granth*. Some Sikhs were subsequently excommunicated or called before the Akal Takht (<http://patshahi10.com/category/important-documents/hukamnmas>). Later, there were calls for scholars to provide definitive evidence for their *Dasam Granth* claims. Still, the *Dasam Granth* debate shows no signs of abating in India or the global Sikh diaspora. For example, in 2016, a Sikh group in Malaysia requested that the Akal Takht act against any groups who perform Prakash of the *Dasam Granth* with the text on the same level as the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

These debates continue to focus primarily on the so-called "Puranic" portions of the *Dasam Granth*, which critics of the text find too closely connected with Hindu tradition to have been the work of Guru Gobind Singh, while those who consider Guru Gobind Singh the author explain that he found stories of gods, goddesses, and avatars useful for instruction and inspiration but did not advocate their worship. *Caritropākhiān* in particular, because of its at times graphic imagery, is a frequent topic of debates, with some arguing that Guru Gobind Singh would never have written such explicit material, and others explaining that he did so solely for moral instruction.²

Recent Scholarship Addressing the *Dasam Granth*

The ongoing focus on authorship and disputed content has often overshadowed questions about how one might understand the *Dasam Granth* as a whole and, more broadly, situate Sikh literature in the wider realm of both Brajbhasha and Indo-Persian literature. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Rinehart 2011: 145–146), the *Dasam Granth* shares many characteristics of the Sanskrit and Prakrit poetic anthologies compiled at royal courts, often organized around the *puruṣārthas*, or human aims of *artha* (material well-being), *dharma* (cosmic order, duties of individuals), and *kāma* (love). These anthologies emphasized the responsibility of kings to ensure that *dharma* could thrive in their realms. The propagation and maintenance of *dharma* is a central, recurring theme

throughout the *Dasam Granth*, both in the accounts of the Sikh gurus and in the many stories of deities battling demons who had upset the cosmic order. The frequent references to the shortcomings of various religious leaders, from avatars to gurus such as Gorakhnath and Ramanand, and prophets such as Muhammad, reveal a concern for elucidating a distinctively Sikh approach to leadership that may be framed in the context of Guru Hargobind's model of *mirī-pīrī*, or worldly and spiritual leadership.

There is a steadily growing body of scholarship that situates the *Dasam Granth* in the wider social, religious, and political context of early modern India. Noteworthy examples include Louis E. Fenech's work on the Sikh gurus' courts (2008) and the *Zafarnāmā* (2013); Purnima Dhavan's analysis (2011) of the role of *Bacitra Nāṭak* in the development of the Khalsa amidst competing conceptions of Sikh identity, as well as the role of military labor markets; Hardip Singh Syan's work (2013) on Sikh public philosophy and views on militancy in the seventeenth century; and Kamalroop Singh and Gurinder Singh Mann's work (2015) detailing additional manuscripts and apocryphal *Dasam Granth* compositions and their role among different Sikh communities. Recent studies also explore the ongoing debates; Jacobsen and Kaur (2012) provide a fascinating glimpse of how the *Dasam Granth* debate has played out in Nordic diaspora communities, highlighting the nature of transnational networks and popular Sikh websites.

Other aspects of the *Dasam Granth* deserving more attention are its stories of the avatars and various deities and demons. While these have most often been explored with reference to Sanskrit texts, clearly, they may be situated amongst the many regional, vernacular, and varying versions of these stories, such as the many versions of the story of Ram and Sita. As both Dhavan's and Syan's research shows, the *Dasam Granth*'s many depictions of battles and glorification of weaponry and their subsequent usage in Sikh circles suggests further opportunities for understanding military cultures and views of violence in the context of *dharma*. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's work on the role of feminine in Sikhism draws upon the goddess tales in the *Dasam Granth* (Singh 1993); the stories about women in *Caritropākhiān* could yield further insights on constructions of gender in late-seventeenth-century India (Rinehart 2010). It is also worth noting that, although significant portions of the *Dasam Granth* explore matters related to gender roles, there have been very few females participating publicly in debates regarding the text. Jacobsen et al.'s work on *Dasam Granth* reception in the diaspora (2012) suggests that further ethnographic exploration could add more voices to the *Dasam Granth*'s role in Sikhism, including those of Sikh women. There is still much to be learned from the ongoing, contested reception of this complex, controversial, and majestic text.

Notes

- 1 For further discussion of these varying views, see Rinehart (2011: 45–49).
- 2 See, for example, the extensive, ongoing discussion at the “Sri Dasam Granth Sahib” page of SikhAwareness at www.sikhawareness.com/forum/48-sri-dasam-granth-sahib/ (Viewed June 25 2019).

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5

ENCOUNTERING ONENESS AND EXILED BEING

Conceptualizing Udāsī in the Janamsākhīs, Vārān Bhāī Gurdās, and Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib

Harjeet Singh Grewal

Introduction

The *janamsākhī* literature today is considered by academics to be a hagiographical genre that contains a salvific myth about Guru Nanak (1469–1539). Although this definition has become a commonly accepted truth, I suggest that critically reading *sākhī* narrative raises questions about the veracity and applicability of this definition. For instance, when Sajjan Thagg asks Guru Nanak for salvation, Guru Nanak replies that granting salvation is not something he is able to do. If the purpose or function of this genre is to create a sense of community around the image of Guru Nanak as a savior of the Sikhs, this rejection of salvific prowess seems misplaced. This raises the question, to what extent are janamsakhis hagiographies based upon a pious belief in Guru Nanak as a savior?

In this chapter, I do not consider how to categorize janamsakhis fully, rather I take the difficulty in classifying them as a point of departure for a deeper study of their content and textuality. Indeed, a critical literary examination of the janamsakhi is needed to better understand its nuances and the networks of interpretation they create. The janamsakhis develop shortly after Guru Nanak's lifetime and are one of the earliest secondary texts in the Sikh tradition. They are dialogic texts that rely heavily upon quotes from *Srī Gurū Granth Sahib* (SGGS, hereafter) and often deal with ethical questions using figurative language. The janamsakhi literature evolved, expanded, and incorporated seminal secondary texts like *Vārān Bhāī Gurdas* into their system of references until about the nineteenth century. (W.H. McLeod 1980) During the twentieth century, towards the end of the Singh Sabha Reform Movement, a new generation of scholars influenced by Western forms of textual criticism embarked on a philological project of editing janamsakhi texts of perceived errors. The incorporation of this hermeneutics of skepticism abruptly created irresolvable debates and changed the way in which the janamsakhis would be produced, discussed, and used.

The janamsakhis are popular literature that are orally transmitted in family settings and are regularly heard in gurdwara settings. There is also an extensive archive of janamsakhi manuscripts, lithographed, and print janamsakhis beginning from the time of Guru Amardas Sahib in the 1570s. Based on testimony within the literature, it is possible that the janamsakhi archive was established during the life of Guru Angad (r. 1539–1552) although no manuscripts from that time have been discovered up to this point in time. An individual anecdote from Guru Nanak's life is often referred to as a sakhi, whereas the entire compendium is called a janamsakhi. Apart from sakhis, a janamsakhi

manuscript often contains *gostis*, or philosophical dialogues between Guru Nanak and prominent representative of different schools of thought. In the archive, the size and scope of a janamsakhi differs in terms of length and contents. Despite variations between manuscripts, scholars acknowledge that there is a core set of sakhis around which later sakhis were included. Although it was not historically the case, today scholars differentiate between several distinct version of the janamsakhis. These are largely based upon sectarian differences or the degree to which perceived miraculous material has been included. It has also been suggested that some of the variations may reflect class and caste status. The main janamsakhis tradition are the Purātan Janamsakhi, the Bālā Janamsakhi, the Ādi Sakhi, the Meharbān-vālī Janamsakhi, and the Bhāī Manī Singh-vālī Janamsakhi. These traditions should not be understood as entirely distinct as quite a bit of overlap exists in terms of sakhis; these similarities extend beyond the core sakhis (W.H. McLeod 1968; W.H. McLeod 1980).

In this chapter, I suggest that the notion of an exilic life is embedded in *janamsākhī* narrativity. This leitmotif is a central driver of Sikh knowledge production and vital to a Gursikh worldview. I show this by arguing that the network of references to *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* and other seminal early Sikh texts are integral to the janamsakhis. Understanding aspects of this network of references provides insights into how literature was produced in the early Sikh tradition. Insights gleaned from such analysis also better position us to critically engage Sikh literary texts. I argue that texts like *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*, *Janamsākhīs*, and *Vārān Bhāī Gurdas* created an interconnected pathway of interpretation (Sontag 1961) through which early Sikh intellectuals produced meaning. The janamsakhi literature is particularly apropos for showing these facets of Sikh literature and thinking. Therefore, they can assist in rethinking how Sikh literature and thought develop from an early point during the sixteenth century. They show how intellectuals layered portrayals of Guru Nānak upon epistemes grounded in Sikh intellection – or the practices and ethical actions associated with a Gursikh worldview. My analysis allows me to shift the focus and scope of the discourse on janamsakhis beyond notions of piety associated with hagiography and turn to think about language, meaning, knowledge production, and narrativity in the early Sikh tradition (Grewal 2017, 2020).

In his essay *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said discusses the dissonance created by being away from home, or exile (Said 2000). He says somewhat mournfully that

exile is a condition of terminal loss . . . the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. . . . The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

(Ibid., 148)

However, in a more redemptive posture, he later speaks of the pleasures of exile, such as, “seeing the entire world as a ‘foreign land’ makes possible originality [and] . . . a plurality of vision that gives rise to awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (Ibid.). These dimensions of exile are actual environments that occur together for Said. I suggest something similar in the term *udāsī* where the loss of self-consciousness occurs with a reclamation of truth-consciousness, which results in exilic life.

Udāsī can mean different things, but the use of it as an existential state of exile has not been considered by scholars. The standardized modern *janamsākhī* contains four separate journeys undertaken by Nānak before he settles at Kartārpur, although there are manuscripts that includes five journeys (K. Singh 1969b; T. Singh 1969c; H. Singh 1969a). Each of these journeys is called an *udāsī*. However, this is not the only way that the term *udasi* is used in the janamsakhi. It represents Nanak’s state of being and, therefore, has ontical aspects that are not acknowledged in the historiographical debates around the janamsakhi literature. Udāsī can mean a state of sadness, or

reclusiveness, which stands in contradistinction with Nānak's teachings of social engagement. Based upon the itinerary of his journeys, scholars have interpreted these sequences as including visits to major pilgrimage centers. By examining the interconnection of key terms from the SGGS, I argue that the existential use of the term *udāsī* can be recovered. Singing the attributive names of truth facilitates a transposition that redeems exilic consciousness. The janamsākhīs speak to an understanding of this vision and the terminology associated with it. The Gursikh vision of *eka-aneke* that is required for exilic life expresses the possibility of a political pluralism that emerges from the SGGS. There are numerous examples of eke-aneke in gurbani, for instance, "You are the manifestation of the unmanifest, the One with and without qualities. Recognize the one and only in its singularity and multiplicity" (SGGS, 250). This verse, in *nāga gaurhī*, suggests that eka-aneke, or the one and unone, pervades all things. I suggest that the Gursikh vision requires an aloofness to one's place in the world as a foreigner because our consciousness remains both one and unone.

Bani, Guru, and Gurbani in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*

In the frame story of *Giān Ratanāvalī* (Sābara 1993), the sangat approached Bhai Mani Singh to correct errors that had accumulated within the janamsakhi literature by writing a newly edited version of the janamsakhi free of sectarianism. The sangat recognized his wealth of knowledge and experience and requested that he revise the janamsakhis. They acknowledged the deleterious impact of sectarian debates upon the janamsakhi literature and the inclusion of spurious material that impacted their contentment (*sidak*) with the sakhis. Bhai Mani Singh told the sangat that Guru Arjan had Bhai Gurdas write the first of his *vārān* about Guru Nanak. For this very purpose, they should refer to Bhai Gurdas to better understand how to sift through the additional material in other janamsakhis. However, the sangat stated that those sakhis were too densely compacted (*sūcanā*), and they were hoping he could write a detailed (*visthār*) explanation, or *tīkā*, of that janamsakhi. The *Giān Ratanāvalī* takes the form of a commentary on Bhai Gurdas's first and eleventh *vārān* and uses other sakhis that Bhai Mani Singh heard in Guru Gobind Singh's court (Sābara 1993: 193–195).

This frame story informs readers of circumstance leading to the advent of a revised version of the janamsakhi and tells us about the network of textual references that functioned to inform Sikh knowledge production, or Sikh epistemology. Bhai Gurdas's compositions that are seen as the *kunjī*, or key, to unlocking SGGS already contain the key janamsakhi components (Gill 2017). Bhai Mani Singh's reply also reveals important aspects of the janamsakhi's narrative structure, specifically how storytelling was a conveyance for knowledge transmission. This janamsakhi reflects not only the importance of occasional revision, or revivification, of Sikh texts but also the importance of allusion to a textual network rooted in the SGGS's epistemology. In this section, I argue it is important to critically examine how the janamsakhi's narrative structure uses direct reference, literary allusion, and allegorical embedding of compositions from the SGGS. In doing so, we are better able to connect the janamsakhi to debates and contestations in the terrain of Sikh thought rather than merely being about sectarian factions based upon personality and charisma.

I contend that the janamsakhi genre relies on a narrative structure of allusion, allegory, and cross-referencing because of its use during *katha* performances. This structure not only acts as a pedagogical tool for teaching exegetes but a way also to engage in a situationally based hermeneutics with a sangat, and it may have been a mnemonic tool for enhancing commentaries while performing *katha*. The janamsakhi's place in the Sikh tradition's nervous circuitry is afferent – a way to redirect audiences to the SGGS's epistemology and encourage the usage of gurbani epistemology in routinized Sikh praxis. By viewing the janamsakhi from this perspective, we gain a clearer sense of the limits and horizons of early modern Sikh thought. Furthermore, we learn that the tradition

was refining and developing its own philological tools to conduct probing analysis and revision of texts because of the impacts of sectarianism on Sikh thought between Guru Arjan and Bhai Mani Singh's lifetimes – or roughly from the 1590s to 1740. Examining the janamsakhi's interconnections to Sikh epistemology in the SGGS can provide a window into how issues of diversity of interpretation, contestation, and authority were reflected in early modern Sikh intellectual life. This helps better understand the development of the Sikh worldview as a process occurring not simply in the political realm during the nineteenth century but one that is grounded in ideas and institutions the Sikh Gurus developed.

The Sikh intellectual tradition is grounded in an epistemology of non-oppositional Oneness and the transformative impact of practices rooted in cognitive remapping based on the compositions found in the SGGS (Grewal 2017; Arvind-Pal S. Mandair 2022). The field of Sikh studies in Western universities has been largely indifferent to analysis of the Sikh tradition's epicenter: SGGS. The categorization of this text as a "scripture" occurs largely through fiat during the colonial encounter. However, this classification facilitates a focus in Sikh studies on gurbānī, or the Granth's language, as the personal expressions of charismatic devotional mystics (the Sikh Gurus) rather than being a revelatory language. However, Gursikhī's epistemologic framing construes SGGS as a living Guru or sabad-guru (A.S. Mandair 2009): it is the manifested body of the One Creator's light that contains a form of knowledge that removes darkness (*guragyān*).

SGGS is the living embodiment of an unworldly (*ajūnī*) and untimed (*akāl*) language spoken by the Sovereign Formless Being (*nirangkar*) at its court. We need go no further than the thirty-fourth paurhi of Guru Nanak's seminal composition, *Jap Ji Sahib*, to read how this is framed:

You are true, and your court is real. From there, the five emanate and become accepted. From there, they are made visible targets. By transforming fragility to enduring resolve we are taken there. Nanak has been, the reciter is taken there.

(Japji: 38)

Drawing upon the idea that all ten Sikh Gurus shared the same essence, or *joti*, we can understand this paurhi as expressing that the Sikh Gurus had been taken to Nirangkar's court and were given the ability to communicate what is said there to humanity. Within the SGGS, this distinction is marked by not using the actual name of any Sikh Guru in the title of a composition; instead the term *mahalā*, or abider, is used followed by a number (S. Singh 2019). This latter conceptualization is representative of the worldview that created diverse forms of the janamsakhis. Despite variations and sectarian views, it is important to acknowledge this worldview informed choices and decisions about narrative structure – such as selection of quotes from SGGS – made by authors of different janamsakhi manuscripts. Furthermore, the janamsakhis were individual attempts to explain these quotes contextually within a narrative landscape by mostly unknown authors whose diversity of understanding are reflected in how these narratives are constructed to explain the selected quotes.

To what extent then does the avoidance of certain genres of writing represent agency of Sikh intellectuals and, moreover, epistemic and ethical consistency within a horizon of limits established by the Sikh Gurus through gurbani? How did Sikh intellectuals approach the writing of narrative? How was writing narrative connected to ideas about different registers of language? There were established, intricate, and interconnected Indic and Islamic traditions of philosophy during the early modern period that the Sikh Gurus had access to linguistically and interpersonally through established bonds with representatives of these schools of thought. However, the SGGS as well as other central early texts, like *Vārān Bhai Gurdas* (VBG hereafter), and specific *janamasakhis* are critical of philosophical and theological schools of thought. I briefly examine how SGGS's language,

gurbānī, gets utilized in *VBG* and associated with *sākhī* and *kathā*. It is important to consider that Sikh intellectuals made choices to avoid certain narrative formations, such as lexicons, grammars, and philosophical texts, based on their training in the *SGGS* epistemology and the Sikh tradition's egalitarian humanist ethos. Writing narratives like the *janamsakhis* may have been consistent with the non-oppositional Oneness that *gurbani* was a living embodied expression of different degrees across various *janamsakhi* manuscript recensions. It is, therefore, important to have a better understanding of their narrative structure and how it is associated with the central concept of *gurbani*.

The term *bānī* is used on its own or in different compound nouns through the *SGGS* and other primary Sikh texts. Derived from the Sanskrit word, *vānī*, meaning music, diction, language, or laudation, in the discourse of Sikhism, it is often glossed in translation as “revelation” (P. Singh 2000; McLeod 1968; Mandair 2009). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh mentions *bānī* to make a larger point about the poetic language of the *SGGS* being at the center of Sikh sacred space. *Bānī* is not only based on a feminine principle but also imbued with a sensuality that is set to “musical patterns that remain in harmony with the rhythm of nature that individuals can intuit” (N-G K Singh 1993: 5, 248 and 251). The conceptual underpinnings of the term *bani* are made unclear partly due to borrowing the concept of “revelation” to translate it and may be better reflected through the phrase “inspired utterance.”

Pashaura Singh has noted how Guru Amardas, the third mahala, uses *bānī* 170 times or more than twice as much as Guru Nanak, the first mahala's 62 instance. The connection notion that the *granth* is Guru may have developed alongside the evolution of the term; indeed, as Singh states, Guru Ram Das's use of the term *bānī* in *Nat Ashtapadiān* is one verse that can be linked to the idea the *bānī*, or the writings of the mahalas, is the Guru (Pashaura Singh 2000: 8–12). Given the emphasis on thinking about the term *bānī* in *SGGS*, a more nuanced understanding of it as a concept may help determine its function in the structure of *janamsākhīs* and other early Sikh texts.

Bānī is conceptualized as the light (*gura*) of the creator that presides over and pervades the cosmos and, therefore, all of creation. The *gurbani* written by the mahalas in *SGGS* enhances the associations between *nām*, truth, and light while emphasizing the musical metrical aspects of *bānī* as a literary language of transformation. A verse by the fourth mahala in *rāga nat nārāen* is an example of how these ideas work together (*SGGS*, 982). These two couplets directly convey the connection between *bānī*, a language of literary musical composition, and *gurū* (*gurU*), “*bānī* is the light (*gurū*), the light is *bānī*.” The embodiment of light – or *bānī* – is attained through *nam* in one who manifests the principle of light in speech and action. In a related composition by Bhagat Kabir, light – taken as heat, energy, or a spark – represents the initial form of creation: “Allah brought forth light initially and all beings within creation from it; upon that one light all realms emerge, some are beneficial while others are harmful” (*SGGS*, 1349–1350). These couplets show that the term *gurū* embodies and manifests a type of light that function to create the cosmos; it radiates through creation and grants access to the realms of creation.

A verse from the second mahala in *vāra sārang* states that the essence of knowledge is made visible to a *gurmukh* who focuses their speech, essence, conscious being, and action upon the compound noun *amritbānī* (*SGGS*, 1243). *Amritbānī* becomes integral to a *gurmukh's* being. The essence of things enters into their intellect, and they are attentive to it through the practice of reciting the *bānī*. A verse by mahala 3 in *srī rāg* discusses these benefits by comparing a *gurmukh* to a *manmukh*. The *manmukh* is seen as focused on (non)duality and the accrual of their rightful proportion of worldly things. The *gurmukh* is engaged in a battle of the mind, and ingesting *nām* assists in mitigating

or destroying the torpor-filled self-conscious mind, or *āpnā-man*, and allowing that same mind to return equipoise of the truth-conscious mind, *sat-man*. With the attainment of *sat-man*, the transformation to true being (*sachīārā*) is enacted, allowing the light of the One Creator to become the gurmukh's ontical truth – or *subhav* (SGGS, 87). If the gurmukh achieves this, they become praise-worthy and are in an acceptable state.

Much of Sikh lived-experience, including practices, festivities, and the daily rhythm of life revolves around usages of gurbani from the SGGS (Arvind-pal Singh Mandair 2013). The term, *gursikhī* represents a knowledge system that focuses on removing darkness and moving towards One truth. *Gursikhī* is essential to the *gurmukh* way, or *māraga*, expounded upon by Guru Nānak; *gursikhī* moves an individual from dark obscurantist ontic, or an inability to see clearly, towards an ontological presence of “true being” – *sachīārā*. This occurs by accepting truth through knowledge of that creative function of light, which becomes a symbol for the Oneness of all creation. Knowing the true light, the individual becomes non-oppositional. They are neither opposed to being in this world, nor are they attached to it; they neither abide in difference through imagined binary ideations, nor do they seek perfection through singularity. Non-oppositionality, as a *Gursikh* concept, does not mark a binary distinction between light and darkness; indeed, darkness and light are understood as gradations that occur along a spectrum situated within creation by the Creator. This gradient of creation is manifested to reflect properties of the Creator. The metaphorical and figurative references indicate a shift from an unseeing onticality based on empirically evaluative engagement with the material world through difference to an exilic engagement with the material world. This form of exilic life is represented in texts like the *janamsakhi* using figurative language.

While *janamsakhi*'s use figurative of language alludes to this exilic life through Nanak's *udāsīs* and the command to remain untouched by the world, a pattern to this exilic life centered on SGGS is central to *Gursikh* practices. The regular practice of *simran*, *kirtan*, and *katha* establish the rhythm of Sikh consciousness by patterning everyday life and movement. They also extend into festivals and holidays that involve prolongation of the collective congregational aspects, such as *kirtan* and *katha*. For festival days, these extended services most typically occur within a local *gurdwara* in *sangat*. The significance of these practices find mentions in most early Sikh primary texts (W.H. McLeod 1987; Piar Singh 1974; B.V. Singh 2004). The *janamsākhi*s mention Guru Nanak engaging in and encouraging these practices while he worked as a granary at Daulat Khan's court in Sultanpur Lodi. *Sangats* would gather every evening and morning at Guru Nanak's house to sing *kirtan* and hear *katha* (B.V. Singh 2004). The emphasis on these practices has been underemphasized in studies of early Sikh literature. I argue that they allude to the references instructing *Gursikhs* to engage in *simran*, *kirtan*, and *katha* that is found in SGGS.

SGGS not only refers to the importance of *simran*, *kirtan*, and *katha*, their definition relies on notions of *gursikhi* or *gurmukhi* in a way that signifies the importance of their routinized practice and their centrality to ontic aspects of *gursikhī* and *gurmukhi*. The connection of being a Sikh of the Guru, the daily rhythm centered upon reading gurbani, and the *Gursikh* epistemology is discussed in *rāga gaurhī* by *mahālā* 4. This passage discusses the daily rhythm's connection to *Gursikh* knowledge practices (SGGS, 305). A *Gursikh* is described as rising early to engage in *simran*, *kirtan*, and *katha*. They go to *sangat* to hear explanations of the teachings and lose sight of their notions of sin. A *Gursikh* spends every breath in contemplation of the truth and, in doing so, is able to experience the light within their conscious. *Gursikhs* who not only study but also teach and encourage others to study gurbani are held in high esteem. Thus, this can be thought of as a discursive verse meant for instruction on how to immerse oneself in SGGS's epistemology through the routinized practices of *Gursikhi*.

Similar associations about the routinized use of simran, kirtan, and katha are given in Bhai Gurdas's fortieth vāra. These practices, as the verse claims, create the possibility for encountering the true light of Oneness (VBG, 40:11). The phrasing of the first hemistich in the eleventh pauri, "*gursikh bhal ke uth kari amrit vele sar nhavandā*," alludes to the verses from "Gaurhī kī vār," by the fourth mahālā discussed previously. Through this allusion, Bhai Gurdas restates and associates the benefits of waking before sunrise, performing ablutions, and engaging in the routinized practices of a Gursikh. Yet the verse also goes on to elaborate practices like kirtan and katha occurred within early institutions terms like *dharamshālā*, *sādhsangāt*, and *bacan* (another word for *hukam*). Thus, while providing an expansion and contextualization of the fourth mahālā's verse, Bhai Gurdas also draws upon other terms from the SGGS's lexicon.

The phrase *gurbani de prīti*, those enamored by gurbani, used by Bhai Gurdas in vāra 40, paurī 11 is another allusion that refers to couplets composed by the third mahālā in raga sorath (SGGS, 602). The third mahālā's verse uses this phrase to compare and further elaborate on the concepts of manmukh and gurmukh. A manmukh is one who is not enamored by gurbani and is enthralled with the duality of the material world. The manmukh's conscious experience is also rooted in their engagement with the material world. Gurmukhs recite nam through "jap." They become enthralled with gurbani and are eventually taken to the abode of Oneness. The verse elaborates how recitation of nam produces *gurprīti* – a state of being beyond the material experiences of pleasure and pain, for instance, where one's essence (*joti*) becomes amenable (parvāna) for merging with the light of Oneness. This merging is excessive in that it removes the Gurmukh from binary experience of the material world, transporting them to the place from which they embrace Oneness of light that is non-oppositional and non-binary. The practitioner is put upon the gurmukh Panth through practices associated with gurbani that lead to a transposition of consciousness – something I take up in the next section of this chapter in connection with exilic living.

Bhai Gurdas's use of the slightly altered phrase *gurbani de prīti* elaborates the affective transposition that gurbani occasions for a Gursikh routinely reciting nam. He suggests that without the routinization of gurbani's recitation, the transposition of consciousness, figuratively expressed as being made to appear in the true court, cannot occur because the individual's language of being remains ensconced in duality. Both verses clearly highlight the mind as the site of this change. While the practice of recitation is agentive, the transposition of gurbani is determined by autonomic affection: it occurs as a product of Oneness itself, and its comportment is beyond the material world and realms of self-experience. Transposition reflects the interchangeability of the Sikh (disciple) and the gurū (attained knower) using the idea of light merging with light (*joti-joti-samāonā*). This interchangeability is clearly indicated in the SGGS and VBG verses being discussed in the use of the terms *gurasikh* and *sikh-gura*. Bhai Gurdas states that this is akin to "seeing the unseen" – *alakha-lakhā*, another concept found in SGGS. Mingling or meeting the true light changes or reorients how the mind perceives life and death because the true light transposes itself upon worldly consciousness (VBG, 3:11). These ideas are used together to emphasize that the effect of gurbani practices removes darkness and allows for Oneness to appear.

By reading about the importance of the use of gurbani in central Gursikh practices intertextually, in this manner we can see how Bhai Gurdas adds important stipulations and disambiguates issues of place and purpose, which were likely assumed to be understood by the congregations listening to the sabd or that the risk of ambiguation needed clarification during katha by the exponent. It may be that Bhai Gurdas felt a need to clarify given the context of increasingly divisive rivalry following from Guru Arjan's ascension to the *gurgaddī*, or seat of Nanak. The use of literary allusion not only lets Bhai Gurdas refer to the earlier verses from SGGS but lets him expand upon the verse after

compressing the key components of the couplet he thereafter is commenting upon. This intertextual network requires a more rigorous approach to Gursikhi's conceptuality and interconnected knowledge making practices that inform it. Merely reading these texts in isolation or through simplistic modes of translation will not reveal the depth of early Sikh thought.

Gurbani as a Transportive Element and Exilic Gursikh Life

We have seen in the previous section about reading the allusions to gurbani conceptuality between *SGGS* and *VBG* assists in seeing how ideas were developed. One of the broad themes thought about is reunification using the routinized practices centering on *nām*. This represents a perspectival transposition prompted by the true light: when one is taken to the true realm, they experience a shift in their positionality and effectively experience the material world without being enthralled by it. The transformative practices of reciting (*simran*), reading (*katha*), and singing gurbani (*kirtan*) are practices that make access to the true court possible and enable a Sikh exilic life. In this section, I turn to elaborate how *janamsakhis* are also a node in this network of thinking about an exilic engagement with the material world. I will elaborate on my earlier comments about *Gian Ratanavali's* frame story where Bhai Mani Singh agrees to expand upon the *janamsakhi* while integrating the first and eleventh *vars* from *VBG*. I take this frame story as informing the *sangat*, or public, about the narrative structure of early Sikh textuality. Bhai Mani Singh raises our awareness to the system of references within the *janamsakhi* and also provides a valuable tool to consider how Sikh thought unfolded, its *kathā* to deepen the *sangat's* engagement with both the *sakhi* anecdote and gurbani. This section focuses mainly on the twenty-fourth *pauṛī* of the first *vār* in *BVG* vis-à-vis the *sakhi* commonly known today as "Vein Parvesh."

The first *var* in *VBG* is commonly understood as being composed about Guru Nanak. Given Bhai Gurdas's close association with the lineage of Nanak's successors, it is therefore taken to be an authoritative *janamsakhi*. This is not only attested to in the eighteenth-century *Gian Ratanavali*, as I have discussed, but when reformers turned to examine the *janamsakhi* literature, they found themselves relying on *VBG* to cross-reference details against. Before turning to read the twenty-fourth *pauṛī* of the first *var* in detail, I want to briefly situate my reading through a consideration of the twenty-third *pauṛī*, which assists me in establishing how Baba Nanak's encounter with the Formless One occurs. Given that this encounter is the focus on the "Vein Parvesh" *sakhi*, it is fitting to consider how *VBG* and *SGGS* may together have been the inspiration for the prose rendering found in several *janamsakhis* manuscripts with albeit slight variation.

In the twenty-third *pauṛī*, Baba Nanak is stated to have taught Oneness by revealing the singular presence of *pārbrāhm-pūranbrāhm*, removing caste division, and disregarding distinctions between ruler and ruled. To do this, Guru Nanak read, studied, and made the true names (*satinam*) realizable during *Kaliyuga*. Indeed, the opening hemistich and early stanzas allude to the "Giver" responding to humanity's division and suffering by sending Nanak to the light (Guru). The sense of Oneness arrives in the form of these true names, which show the illusory veil of differences – the four castes acting as the "feet of *dharma*" become one, and the sameness of ruler and ruled was made available for dissemination. By making the true names available, Baba Nanak removed the darkness of difference (*VBG*, 1:23). The context for what prompted Guru Nanak during his lifetime is shown therefore to be the state of division and duress that much of humanity found itself during the mid-fifteenth century.

The twenty-fourth *pauṛī* discusses how Baba Nanak was taken to the true court, *sac-khanda*, and his preparations for traveling. I argue that the transportive element of gurbani and its facilitation of an exilic lifeworld, or *ritudāsī*, is an important drive of the Gursikh worldview. This can be seen to

cut across *SGGS* and *VBG*, to enter into the janamsakhi anecdote of “Vein Parvesh,” where Baba Nanak’s own process of attainment through nam-simran and the introduction of the mode (rliq) of udāsī (audwsI) are explained within the true court. Reading through the allusions to gurbani both in *VBG* and the janamsakhi allows me to examine the use of literary devices to describe the transposition of gurbani from an external text and textual practice to an integral component of the mindscape – or what I am referring to as the transposition of Oneness upon human consciousness.

The term *udasi* has been taken in Sikh studies discourse to simply refer to the sojourns or periods of travel that Guru Nanak took with his companion Sikhs after he left the employ of Daulat Khan at Sultanpur. A careful reading of Bhai Gurdas’s twenty-fourth pauṛī assists in understanding the conceptual aspect of the term udāsī with greater acumen beyond such simplistic and literal readings. More broadly, it allows for more nuanced interpretations of Sikh narratology in literary genres like the janamsakhi, where the depth of figurative language is almost never taken up for analysis.

The twenty-fourth pauṛī uses the idea of gurbani as Guru, or a language of light, transposing itself upon the body of the practitioner. It states that without the light (*Guru*), there is a darkness (gubār), and humanity is heard shrieking in dismay (*VBG*, 1:24). It also contains phrases that allude to two important anecdotes from janamsakhis: “Vein Parvesh” and “Malik Bhago.” Baba Nanak is enveloped by nām and becoming an arrivant in sachkhand. Just prior to that, the phrase *rorhā kī* is used. This term can be taken to mean “stones” and therefore thought to allude to the pile of stones outside Bhai Lalo’s home where Guru Nanak stayed. According to popular memory, Guru Nanak is said to have delivered his teachings by sitting on these stones in the “Malik Bhago.” However, if taken to mean “being submerged and washed away,” the phrase can be taken to allude to the *vein parvesh* sakhi. While both speak to the topic of exilic life, I will for the sake of brevity focus only on how the “Vein Parvesh” can be read as referring to a lingual transposition brought on by the routinized Gursikh practice and eventually lead to an exilic life.

The vein parvesh sakhi and *SGGS*’s epistemology in key compositions like Japji Sahib nonetheless allows for a certain momentary disambiguation. The last line of the second hemistich from the twenty-fourth pauṛī, “*Bābā paidā sachikhandḍ nau nīdhi nāmu gharībī pāī*.” This line gives rise to a placename for where Baba Nanak went “the realm of truth,” or *sachikhandḍ* (sicKMif) and the treasures of nām (nauiniDnm) with which he is carried (*VBG*, 1:24). There are also several poignant and apropos expressions found in *SGGS* given to the first mahala that speak to the need to build wealth through acquiring nām, “The true sangat is the place from which we depart to the true court using the treasured names” (*SGGS*, 1245). The salok continues by stating that the use of this treasure in creating sangat, or togetherness, removes darkness, and light irradiates the body. The second distich refers to alchemical transition of states, saying that people bring iron with them to the sangat only to have it turned to gold. This simile uses the early modern interests in alchemy to describe the impact of gathering to study nām: the change from life in darkness to one where an individual becomes a beacon for the true light of nam. The terms parvāna (accepting) and pāras (transforming) are used here as well as in Bhai Gurdas’s fortieth vār to refer to the sangat’s role in transposition. This is because sangat is the place where kirtan and kathā are practiced as we have discussed in the previous section. Nām is a treasure that gets accrued through catalytic practices like simran, kirtan, and kathā and gets transposed upon the mind. Nam is, thereafter, put upon the body (*ghatī*) and intuited or perceived as radiance. This provides the conceptual framework for what Nikky-Guninder Kaur describes as darshan, or vision, of the one true light (N-G.K. Singh 1993).

Bhai Gurdas’s use of the term *sachikhandḍ* alludes to Japji Sahib where, between pauṛīs 34 and 37, five segments or differentiations (*khandas*) are defined (Japji: 34 to 38). These *khandas* are interpreted as realms or waystations along the gurmukh path; *sachikhandḍ* is the last of these five differentiations. Japji Sahib states that the formless one (*nirankār*) arises from *sachikhandḍ* and that those who

persevere in patience are granted a vision of this exalted state of existence from which everything has been created and remains connected. The formless creator, nirangkār, is the resident of this realm; it is the place from which the cosmos emerges. Nirangkār watches tenderly over creation from sacikhand. All perceptions and appearances take their form here, and all beings act in accordance with truthful knowledge (*hukam*) of this place. Unless it has manifested itself, sackhand is difficult to conceptualize (*vīcār*) and comment (*kathanā*) upon. Bhai Gurdas draws upon this imagery when he mentions that Baba Nanak was brought to, or quite literally, covered up by sacikhand. By reading intertextually between SGGS and VBG, it becomes possible to assert that this act of becoming wrapped up by sacikhand is an alchemical transposition made possible through simran, kirtan, and katha within sangat.

Thus, familiarity with the conceptual and figurative language of early Sikh thought shows that janamsakhi authors may not have intended for Baba Nanak's arrival before Nirangkar to be considered "miraculously" – although it certainly was extraordinary. If we take seriously the assertion in Bhai Mani Singh's *Gianratanaivali*, that VBG needed further explanation and interpretation, we can assert that by returning to SGGS as a treasure-house of Sikh epistemology, the transposition of Baba Nanak occurred because of simran, kirtan, katha using gurbani. It may also be referring to the sangat as the place from where this movement commences.

Bhai Gurdas's figurative language develops further in the "Vein Parvesh" sakhi where Nanak removes his clothes and immerses himself into the water. The water wraps or covers him up and transports him (roVwkl) to the true court – where the water could be a polyvalent symbol signifying the sangat as well as the true court. Prior to going to sachkhand, the first couplet speaks about Baba Nanak's appearance at the threshold of the Bestower. In the sakhi, Nānak goes regularly to the banks to bathe in the Vein rivulet on the outskirts of Sultanpur Lodi with an attendant. On one occasion, he hands his clothes to the attendant and begins bathing when some servants come and take him to Parmesar's true court. The servants present Nanak to the entity, and without identifying itself, Nanak is commanded to drink a cup of amrit. As it is presented to Nanak, he is told the following:

This cup of my name (nām) is for you. It is amrit. Drink it. Through it, you and I are one. Through it, I have granted you successful attainment. Go! Recite my name and have others recite it. Those who recite the names you give them will also be given attainment. Stay unaffected by the world. Abide in nām, giving, cleanliness, service, and Simran.

He is commanded to sing with musical accompaniment about what transpired at the true court, and Japji Sahib in its entirety is given during this encounter (B.V. Singh 1926).

I have been arguing that sakhis like vein parvesh are not meant to depict a miracle per se but are to be read through the epistemology and practices of Gursikhi. The drinking of amrit in the sakhi, the association of amrit with nām, and the ability to recite gurbani represented in this sakhi signify the ingestion and transposition of gurbani within consciousness (mann). A composition by the third mahala in *rāga srī rāga*, connects drinking nām as amrit with the transposition to exilic life I have been developing (SGGS, 87:2). As with previous verses we have discussed, this salok distinguishes between manmukh and gurmukh existentialities – or categories pertaining to human existence through the lens of experience, thought, and emotion. Manmukh and gurmukh are distinguished here between forms of mental activity. A manmukh because does not struggle over things that are beyond the mind's immediate experience of the material world. A gurmukh is engaged in a battle over the mind; they thrash their self-conscious to bring it under control. The term *man-mārnā* is used here to mean exerting control over the *āpnāmanu* or to "weed out" the mind's selfness. Gurmukhs repeatedly drink the amrit of nām while pursuing their desire to rid themselves of the *āpnāmanu*. The consistency of their

actions with truthful living attest to whether they have experienced the meaning of truth. This shift in consciousness is expressed in this verse through ingesting of amrit nām, symbolic for recitation practices involving gurbani and the transposition of gurbani within the mind.

The sakhi uses the symbology of ingesting nam and transposition when the True Sovereign commands that Nanak to drink a goblet full of the amrit of Nirangkar's nam. It is only after Nanak accepts the hukam to drink amrit nām – effectively making him a *hukamī*, or one who accepts and enacts the truth. The entity only identifies itself as Pārbrahm Parmesar and tells Nanak that he is Guru Parmesar. Thus, ingesting amrit nam, the entity becomes identifiable – it gets manifested through the perspectival shift enabled by gurbani's transposition upon the mind. The phraseology Pārbrahm Parmesar is Guru Parmesar, mirrors the reversible equation of Guru-sikh we have discussed earlier to express the idea of *eka-aneke* or diversity through oneness. Nanak is given a robe of honor (*saropāo*) to cover him. He is told to remain untouched (*nirlep*) by the world, and the servants are commanded to return him to the banks of the rivulet. The saropāo symbolizes the ability of nāma when routinized through simran, kirtan, and kathā to ensure the Gurmukh remain shielded while in the battle over consciousness that defines their being. This shielding, or covering oneself, can be taken as another way of representing the exilic life world of a gurmukh.

The conversation happening in sachkhand between Nirangkar and Nanak is an allegory for the transposition catalyzed by gurbani; this conversation occurs in the mind by unleashing one's total cognitive capacity through exposure to sangat, where kirtan and katha are routinely engaged in. Sakhis as expansions or commentaries use figurative and literary language rather than the language of historic narrative. They create a new textual world based on SGGS's epistemology, in this way they are free from exclusively temporal portrayals of what might be ek-static (untimed) eventualities. As ek-static eventualities, sakhis gesture to the untimeliness of one's comportment in the world and attempt to remap cognition using the transpository aspect of gurbani to bring on the exilic lifeworld known as the gurmukh path.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that a careful intertextual reading that is attentive to leitmotifs, literary allusions, and other forms of figurative language assist in better understanding Gursikh epistemology and narratology, which is grounded in the SGGS. After returning from the true court, Baba Nanak prepares for his udāsī, or exilic life, by relinquishing himself of all his belongings, having a rabab created for his companion Mardānā, and the refusal of the two more salient religiopolitical identities of the time: Hindu and Muslim. Nanak's exilic life, remaining unaffected by the world while being in it, begins in this way.

I have attempted to do this by considering how the term gurbānī is used to refer to a certain type of language that is meaning to be recited and is associated with a set of routine practices for its use. The claim central to early Sikh thought is that gurbani as a language opens a new space for being through *sabd-imbued-oneness* (*ek rangī sabd*) as the backdrop. This language transposes itself upon the mind altering the consciousness directly by relying on the catalytic properties of Gursikh praxis. As Nānak completes his audience with the Creator, he is told to establish his way (*panth*), to repeat nām, and to implore others to do so. He is told to return to the world, remaining untouched by it (*nirlep rehnā*). Nānak returns to Sultānpur but immediately makes preparation for his departure.

Nānak does not simply go on an udāsī. He is *udās* and therefore exists within that rubric (*udāsī*). This is seen explicitly in the janamsakhi in a conversation between Nānak and his mother. When she asks him to stay at home, he answers that he is unable to as he is still *udās* – this answer is not associated with his travels but with his state of being. Nānak's actions, social engagement, and

intellectual debates take on an important resonance in this way as a critique of mystic ways of spiritual life – such as those practiced by influential yogic lineages started by Nānak's son, Sri Chand, that also went by the name udāsī. Nānak's udāsī furthers the dictum he received after disappearing into the Vein River. Udāsī, therefore, stands for not only his return to the world and his state of being upon that return – being in the world without being touched by it.

The exilic life world signified by the term *udāsī* is reflected in the janamsakhi through Nānak's way of being in the world without feeling its affect (*nirlep rehnā*). This is connected to Nānak's embodiment as *sabdsurat* (the form of sabd) when reappearing at the Vein River. The period of udāsī undertaken after his return from the true court can be interpreted as a response to the command, or *hukam*, to return to the world after an encounter with the truth of Oneness to benefit humanity. Udāsī as exile also reflects the non-oppositional rejection of differentiation and identitarian logic in preference for Oneness of being represented by companionship between created and creator. This is best exemplified in the janamsakhi, when Nānak expresses to his parents that he is unable to return home because he is still an *udās*, giving a sense that his being is in exile. Udāsī is not simply an event or a journey that is undertaken but an unfolding process of *being* udās, or exiled from the material world so as to maintain a perpetual connection to an unarticulated creator beyond creation (*pārbrahm pamesar nirankār*).

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6

PERSIAN SIKH LITERATURE

Louis E. Fenech

I

Yak arj guftam pesh-i tow dar gos kun kartār

I make this solitary petition before you, Creator of the Universe, please pay heed.

—(Guru Nanak, *Rāg Tilāng* 1, GGS, p. 721)

This line from Sikh scripture is almost entirely in Persian and follows grammatical conventions that are explicitly Persian. It testifies to Guru Nanak's familiarity with the language suggesting that Persian too is a "Sikh language." It is therefore proper that we spend effort on trying to understand just what is meant by Persian Sikh literature. Are these simply works written by Sikhs about Sikhs and Sikhi in Persian? The epigraph would thus qualify. Can we also include Persian literature generally about the Sikhs including hostile Persian chronicles in which Sikhs figure? Can this category then be expanded to include the Persian *tārikhs* of eighteenth-century *misl*dārs? And those of the Lahore Darbar such as the *Umdātuttawārikh* or *Zafar-nāmāh*-i *Ranjīt Singh*? Perhaps Persian literature written on behalf of Sikh patrons? One can argue that all of these should be part of this definition especially since these categories can overlap. Such intersection is most explicit in the famous mid-seventeenth-century *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* or *The School of Religious Traditions*, to which we will return momentarily (Esfandiyar 1983).

As this entry is meant to only provide a brief description of such literature, we will be restrictive, including in our purview only those Persian texts written by Sikhs (in all but rare cases) and which focus on ideas and figures we generally understand as Sikh, such as the Sikh Gurus, great Sikh heroes, and Sikh understandings of the cosmos and the divine. This will therefore necessarily exclude most Persian chronicles from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that reference the Sikhs, especially as combatants, as well as non-Sikh-written Persian texts that praise the Sikh Gurus, the latter of which includes the Persian *Bhakt-māl* (*Garland of Saints*) of the Hindu poet Ram Soni "Navanit" completed in 1682 CE (Hawley 2015: 138–139, 225). Those Persian texts prepared by or for the Mughal emperors in which Sikhs are mentioned or addressed will be also ignored, including the *Akbar-nāmāh*, *Jahāngīr-nāmāh*, *Nairang-i Zamāna*, *Khulāṣatuttawārikh*, *Aḥkam-i 'Ālamgīrī*, and the *Akhlbārāt-i Darbār-i M' allā*, among others written by either hostile or generally indifferent non-Sikh

authors (Ganda Singh 1949; Grewal and Habib 2001). Finally, the general Persian histories of the various Sikh misls and of later Sikh rulers will also be excluded.

Let us then begin, with our limitations in mind, by noting that Persian Sikh literature of the variety mentioned previously is by no means abundant, nowhere near the number of texts produced in either Brajbhasha and Punjabi, or for that matter the Sacred Language of the Adi Granth. These form the bulk of Sikh literature and continue to do so today with English a distant second. But despite the paucity of much of this Persian Sikh literature, what there is forms an important component of the sacred Sikh canon, *bāṇī*, in which we discover in at least one case the initial articulation of one of the most fundamental of Sikh doctrines, the right to permissible defensive violence.

II

Before we turn our attention to Sikh-authored Persian works, however, there is one text I would like to include in this discussion that was not written by a Sikh. This is the previously mentioned *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* completed during or immediately after 1653 CE, recording meetings and observations that occurred in 1643. It is true that the *Dabistān* was written by the Zoroastrian scholar Mobad Shah largely with the intent of broadcasting those features of the “world religions” about which he wrote that aligned well with his own *Aẓar Kaivānī* brand of Zoroastrian tradition to an audience of his Zoroastrian peers. This was ultimately to demonstrate the pristine truth of that tradition. But it is also true that our author prepared the text based not only on his astute observations but also on the discussions in which he engaged with his interlocutors, two of whom were Gurus Hargobind and Har Rai (Behl 2010: 113–149). And as well it is worth noting that of all early non-Sikh observers of the Sikhs, Mobad Shah is the only one who assigns a separate sectarian identity to the Sikhs even though he includes their relatively substantial description as one of the twelve he assigns to “Hindus” (though in this instance the designation only regards those traditions established within Hind or India). Given all this, as well as the fact that Mobad Shah’s observations tally with the ideas of his contemporary Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, it seems logical to include his work in this survey.

As it is therefore the *Dabistān* provides a very well-disposed account that is derived from multiple sources: literature, observation and insight, discussion, and anecdotes all filtered through the Azar Kaivani sieve of our author, which because of Mobad Shah’s selection process leaves little behind. We hear stories from the janam-sakhis and janam-sakhi-like narratives (especially those which show Guru Nanak adopting “the exoteric symbols and stories of a religious group, while crafting one’s own set of beliefs” – a story that well aligns with Mobad Shah’s own tradition) (Behl 2010: 138; McLeod 1968: 160), we see descriptions of Sikh teachings, the nature of Sikh Guruship, the institution of the masands, and the caste makeup of the Panth. Not only do we hear the stories of the successive Sikh Gurus and one of the earliest descriptions of the execution of Guru Arjan, but perhaps with the eleventh *vār* of Bhai Gurdas in mind, Mobad Shah also highlights the stories of individual Sikhs such as Bidhia the Jat, all of whom serve the Nanak-panth and the Sikh Gurus. The overall impression of Mobad Shah’s various descriptions is the one captured in the enchanted Sikh universe about which Harjot Oberoi wrote (Oberoi 1994). Since the text was specifically written with a Zoroastrian audience in mind, its circulation was severely limited.

Mobad Shah was not a Sikh, nor was his contemporary, Surat Singh, who prepared a Persian *taẓkirah* or religious biography/hagiography in honor of the spiritual master Pir Hassu Teli. In this we find the first description of a visit to the so-called tomb of Guru Nanak (Grewal and Habib 2001: 85–89). During the mid-seventeenth century when both works were finalized there were, it appears, no Sikhs writing in Persian. But as we approach the end of the seventeenth century, that situation changes, and it does so quite dramatically.

Let us note though as we turn our attention to Sikh writers of Persian that the fact that there is a Persian Sikh literature at all, of a religious variety written by Sikhs, would have likely raised the eyebrows of many Sikhs in the eighteenth century, particularly Sikhs of the Khalsa. In several Khalsa *rahit-nāme*, *śāstra*-like texts that prescribed how members of the Khalsa should behave and what they should believe, most of which draw their prescriptions directly from Guru Gobind Singh, Persian is singled out for condemnation being as it was assumed the bureaucratic language of the Mughal empire. It was the administrators of the Mughal imperium who mercilessly persecuted the Sikhs or so explicated these Sikh writers, and any association with it – its cuisine, symbols, and languages – was thus deemed anathema – an understanding scattered throughout eighteenth-century Sikh literature. In the *rahit-nama* attributed to Bhai Daya Singh, one of the celebrated Cherished Five (*pañj piārē*), for example, we read the following:

Bāñī gurmukhī paṛhe arbī farsī na paṛhe

Read the *bāñī* in Gurmukhī. Study neither Arabic nor Persian.

(Padam 1991: 77)

Daya Singh's contemporary, Chaupa Singh Chhibbar, goes one step further in his *Hazurī Rahit-nāmā*:

Turk akhar kesā upar rakhe so tankhāhīā

The Khalsa Sikh who places anything written in the script of the Turks on his sacred *kes* is deserving of censure (*tankhāhīā*).

(McLeod 1987: 104, 180, 236; Fenech 2008: 242–244)

Here even the Persian word *tankhāh*, which refers to one's salary, is used derisively to indicate punishments to be visited upon the inattentive Khalsa Sikh.

Other examples abound, but it is worth noting that while such a denunciation reflects the eighteenth-century environment in which the *rahit-namas* were prepared, it in no way captures the attitude of the Sikh Gurus towards either Islam and Muslims or languages and scripts other than those in which Sikhs traditionally wrote. Indeed, Guru Gobind Singh's *Akāl Ustati* (*In Praise of the Timeless*) makes this point forcefully: the divine is immanent within all that humans can imagine, within themselves, in time and space and language. As the Tenth Master writes,

Kahūn ārabī torkī pārsī ho kahūn pahalavī pasatavī sanskritī ho kahūn des bhākhiā kahūn dev bānī

In some cases, You are Arabic, Torki, and Persian; in others You are Pahlavi, Pashto, and Sanskrit. Sometimes human speech; sometimes divine.

Akāl Ustati 116, *Dasam Granth*: 22

Such a generous and loving understanding of the cosmos and the divine casts even further doubt on his authorship of the *rahit-namas* and their less-than-inclusive stamp. With such insight into the nature of God, it seemed only natural that Guru Gobind Singh would utilize all the languages with which he was familiar to praise and glorify Akal Purakh (the Timeless One). This includes Persian, a language at which Sikh hagiographies mention the young Guru excelled. And although not the first Sikh to write of Sikh doctrines in Persian, Guru Gobind Singh's Persian compositions have had a lasting effect on Sikh understandings overall while simultaneously demonstrating a keen insight into both Islamic and Islamicate values that align with those of the Sikh Gurus.

III

There are several Persian texts attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. While some of these may be easily dismissed as spurious, others appear genuine. The interesting point is that two of these spurious texts both revolve around one that is likely legitimate.

The first of these Persian texts is the letter known today as the *Fath-nāmāh*, or the *Proclamation of Victory*, a letter in verse claimed to have been sent to the emperor Aurangzeb by the Guru in 1705. This letter's attribution is false for several reasons. Firstly, reference to it appears in no early Sikh text. Indeed, it was only discovered in 1922. It then follows what is surely a chequered history. After its discovery, it was almost immediately lost, after which only a portion of it, or so tradition claims, was recovered, recited as it was from memory and then recorded. Sikh tradition claims that this letter was originally composed of 100 *bait*s though the "extant" text contains 23 couplets and a single hemistich. As implausible as all of this sounds, these traditions need not necessarily discount its authenticity, which leads to the second, more significant reason for passing it over as the work of the Guru. What makes its attribution altogether dubious is the fact that Guru Gobind Singh's outlook throughout all the works attributed to him is generally optimistic and trusting in the God of all people, while this letter conveys a tone that is overtly hostile and bitter, focused as it is on vengeance (Ganda Singh 1949: 61–63).

Sikh tradition notes that the emperor's response to the *Fath-nāmāh* encouraged Guru Gobind Singh to write a second, more specific letter. Now this apparent "follow-up" letter is of a profoundly different quality and is much better aligned with the type of sentiments discovered throughout the secondary Sikh scripture, the *Dasam Granth*, much of the contents of which are attributed to the Guru. And for several other factors, it seems highly possible that this letter is in fact the work of the Tenth Sikh Master: the famed *Ẓafar-nāmāh* or *Epistle of Victory*. Emic Sikh histories certainly assume as much since the letter appears in the accepted edition of the *Dasam Granth* in Gurmukhi script and is preceded by the standard formula indicating its scriptural status, *srī mukh vāk patīśāhī dasvīn*, "uttered from the blessed mouth of the Tenth Lord" (*Dasam Granth*: 1389). The earliest narrative of the Khalsa, Sainapati's *Srī Gur Sobhā* finalized soon after the death of Guru Gobind Singh, devotes an entire chapter to the letter.

The history that this letter has accrued is a well-known one: laid siege to for six months within the fort of Anandgarh by a combination of Mughal and Pahari Rajput forces, the Tenth Guru and his Khalsa were promised safe leave by the emperor Aurangzeb (who took an oath to this effect) if they would abandon their post. Although Guru Gobind Singh took the emperor's oath seriously, as Aurangzeb had written it on a copy of the Qur'an to secure its sanctity, he nevertheless only reluctantly chose to leave the fort after pressure from his family was brought to bear. Immediately upon vacating the fort, Mughal forces treacherously pounced on the departing Sikhs, killing them indiscriminately. Sikhs fought bravely, but in the end, many died among them the Guru's mother and all four of his sons (either in battle or captured and executed). Having fought his way to temporary safety, Guru Gobind Singh wrote the *Ẓafar-nāmāh* as his literary response to this event, after which, tradition notes, he had it couriered to the emperor.

The text of the *Ẓafar-nāmāh* is in the form of a *mašnavī* (a short, versed poem) composed of 111 rhyming couplets, which are divided into two sections: the first 12 *bait*s form the invocation to God (the *ḥamd*) and a veiled acknowledgement of the Prophet Muhammad (*na't*). The second portion is called the *dāstān*, or the "narrative," and is composed of 99 *bait*s which detail the events of 1705–1706 noted previously. The narrative begins at *bait* 13 with the harsh criticism of the oath-breaking emperor's perfidy and then goes on to portray the siege of Anandpur. We are then made aware of the Battle of Chamkaur in which fell the two elder *sāhibzāde*, Ajit Singh and Jujhar Singh.

The Tenth Guru's journeys to the villages of Dina and Kangar are then recounted; after which the Tenth Guru requests the emperor to visit him to discuss the issue of Anandpur. It is at this point that the most poignant segment of the text begins, a description of the loss of the four sons of the Guru. Afterwards, we hear of the duplicity of Aurangzeb, who is both praised and criticized. Scattered throughout the text are maxims and morals outlining the power of one's word, the consequences that befall those who ignore their promises, and various statements about the inscrutability of fate. The letter ends on a victorious note by proclaiming that fate can be circumvented in only one way: in placing one's trust in God. It is this, the Guru tells Aurangzeb (and us), that allowed him to escape the siege of Anandpur and subsequent battles unscathed.

This is as we can note far more than a simple narrative and rebuke of the emperor Aurangzeb as it is also a very optimistic statement, victory in the face of military defeat and so the title. Indeed, the *Zafar-nāmah* also holds out hope for both the emperor, the agent of the death of the Guru's family, who is encouraged to meet with Guru Gobind Singh (*bait*s 59–60), and hope for us as we face our own everyday battles. In this way the themes on which it elaborates are very common ones we discover throughout the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*: acknowledging the truth that is God, manifesting that truth in your daily life, and trusting in the divine to name but three. These among other factors have assured the *Zafar-nāmah*'s place as *bāṇī* or Sikh scripture. Although the themes explored in the *Zafar-nāmah* can easily stand on their own, what enriches these general premises are the numerous textures one discovers throughout the epistle, textures that no contemporary Mughal reader would have missed.

These tactile qualities result from the *Zafar-nāmah*'s mythic background, as it were, the famous *Shāh-nāmah*, or *Book of Kings*, by the tenth-century Iranian poet Abul Qasim Ferdausi, one of the most important texts of the Mughal era. Indeed, the very meter of the Guru's letter is itself drawn from Ferdausi's masterpiece. These intertextual allusions to the great tragedies and trials of Iran's famous heroes, of Esfandiyar, Sohrab, and Iraj among others, augment the tribulations through which the Guru himself had gone. And in a fascinating intertextual interplay, we are treated also to references to Shaikh Sadi's equally famous *Būstān*, or *Orchard* (*bait* 80), prepared in the thirteenth century. This interplay between Sadi, Ferdausi, and Guru Gobind Singh make clear the Persian literary figure with whom the Tenth Guru most sympathized, the son of the Iranian king Kai Kavus, Seyavash, who like the Guru recognized the importance of upholding oaths, dying in the process of doing so, a narrative that stands as one of the most poignant in the *Shāh-nāmah* (Fenech 2013).

Of all Persian Sikh texts, this letter is easily the most important in the annals of Sikhi. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sikhs certainly thought so, as the numerous *Zafar-nāmah* commentaries in Punjabi attest. Not only do we discover clear and concise statements regarding the importance of upholding oaths (*bait* 55 for example) in the letter, but within it is found perhaps the most significant corollary to the Sikh doctrine of *mīrī-pīrī*, the idea of both worldly and spiritual engagement. Indeed, so significant is this result that for many Sikhs the entire text of the *Zafar-nāmah* has been effectively collapsed to this one maxim, *bait* 22, which is also clearly drawn from Sadi's famous *Būstān*:

Chū kār az hamah ḥailī dar gozāsh/ḥalāl ast bordan be-shamsher dast

When all strategies brought to bear are exhausted it is then lawful to take the sword in hand.

(Ganda Singh 1949: 66)

But as we have noted, the *Zafar-nāmah* is far more than this sole couplet, however important the *bait* may be.

Yet despite the sanctity of the epistle, there is some controversy that surrounds it. I am not here referring to the very few Sikh voices that do not acknowledge this letter as the work of Guru Gobind Singh. The circumstantial evidence in favor of the Guru's authorship is strong. No, the controversy regards its position within the *Dasam Granth* and what one means by the title *Zāfar-nāmah*. This strange conundrum allows me to segue to the next Persian Sikh text worth discussing, the *Hikāyat* or *Stories*, which appears immediately after the *Zāfar-nāmah* within the *Dasam Granth*.

If the frequency of manuscripts is any guide to the Sikh appreciation and understanding of these texts, we can safely say that for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sikhs, the *Zāfar-nāmah* proper was a combination of the 111-*bait* letter described in the previous section and the 11 stories that follow it. To facilitate this connection, sometime in the eighteenth century, four distiches were added at the end of the 111-*bait* letter to form a poetic bridge between the two segments. It is indeed quite rare to find a manuscript in which these two are not so combined, whether these be in Perso-Arabic or Gurmukhi script. The *Dasam Granth* itself follows suit and enhances the join by, for example, inserting the words *Hikāyat pahilī* or the *First Story* between distiches 12 and 13 in order to indicate that the *Zāfar-nāmah* proper was the first of 12 stories that make up the full *Zāfar-nāmah* (that is, the *Zāfar-nāmah* plus the 11 *Hikāyats*).

Although the two texts are remarkably different, they also have some things in common: they both share the same *Shāh-nāmah*-esque meter and both also ruminate upon the themes of kingship, leadership, and violence. The 11 stories of the *Hikāyat* are drawn from various texts throughout the history of India both with Indic/Sanskritic and Persian/Arabic origins. Some are even derived from another series of compositions attributed to the Tenth Guru and found in the *Dasam Granth*, the *Pakhyān Charitr*. Like the latter, the *Hikāyats* are often understood to be morality tales conveyed by narratives of kings, princes, and princesses, some who are genuine and sincere, others who are not; some characters in which are silly, while others are deceiving; some fight with much courage, while others run away. Yet within these stories one also discovers themes on conducting the affairs of state, comportment, and proper etiquette. To sometimes overlay a somewhat realistic texture to these stories, one discovers the occasional famous historical figure written into the narrative. To this end, there are stories that include Sher Shah Suri, a tale of whom is told by the "prince of Kalinjar" (*Hikāyat* 11, *Dasam Granth*: 1425–1427), and there is also an appearance by the Mughal emperor Jahangir, who is generally known to Sikh history as the force behind the execution of Guru Arjan, but in the fifth *Hikāyat* (*Dasam Granth*: 1406–1408), he is shown in his famous capacity as the arbiter of justice.

Despite the tenuous connection between the *Hikāyat* and the *Zāfar-nāmah* proper, it is highly unlikely that the Tenth Guru authored these stories if only for the fact that the skewed vision of Islam these presents could simply not be the product of a writer as knowledgeable as Guru Gobind Singh. It is as well difficult to imagine any scenario in which the Tenth Guru would send such a pedestrian series of tales to the emperor of India, a man whose literary tastes were certainly of a connoisseur's character, particularly since these stories say nothing of the situation that prompted the writing of the *Zāfar-nāmah*. One may therefore surmise that when the emperor's *Aḥkam-i Ālamgīrī* makes mention of the Tenth Guru's petition, it just means the 111-*bait* *Zāfar-nāmah* sans *Hikāyat*.

We have mentioned earlier that the *Zāfar-nāmah* is understood as divine writ by most of the world's Sikhs, a status that is generally not shared by the two spurious texts with which it is tentatively associated. There is only one other set of Persian writings that share this august status, the Persian compositions attributed to Nand Lal Goya, the premier poet in the Tenth Guru's literary court. It is to his works that we next turn.

IV

Within the contemporary Khalsa Sikh code of conduct, the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā*, the works of Bhai Nand Lal are accorded a very special place, one shared by only one other respected Sikh writer other than the Sikh Gurus and the Bhagats of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The Code refers to these as *bāṇī* but a particular kind of *bāṇī* as it notes that this *bāṇī* is also *viākhīā sarūp*, one which “assumes the form of commentary.” Like the poetry of Bhai Gurdas, it is claimed that Nand Lal’s writings comment upon the works of the Gurus. But as we look through the Persian works of our poet, it is quite clear these do not really offer a traditional commentary on Sikh scripture or any portion of it but rather relay its message generally and often wax eloquently on the grandeur of the Gurus in Persian poetry, likely for a Mughal audience well attuned to the values of Sufi poetry and the mysticism it conveys. And although beautiful and may be read as broadcasting the spirit of the Sikh Gurus, it nevertheless adds little to Sikh doctrine in the way, say, that the *Ẓafar-nāmah* does, the position of which in Sikh ideology is unique. What it does is convey the broader ideas, doctrines, and values of the Gurus by a literary vehicle, which is far more associated with Islam.

To get an understanding of the position of Nand Lal’s works, we may once again turn to the manuscript record. The two most famous of Nand Lal’s compositions based on frequency are first his collection of ghazals (odes), *rubāīyāt* (quatrains), and distiches (*abyāt*) known as the *Divān-i Goyā*, or *The Collection of [Nand Lal] the Speaker*, the “speaker” *goyā/gūyā* being Nand Lal’s sobriquet, or *takhalluṣ*. In this collection the ghazals are the highest in number (61 – a few manuscripts offer 63 ghazals but the final two are far too amateurish to have been written by a hand as magisterial as Nand Lal’s). These poems are generally composed of 5 to 15 distiches that rhyme and follow a general AA BA CA etc. pattern. Each distich is self-contained and observes a very strict rhyme scheme, or meter, while at the same time maintaining a precise end rhyme captured in the final word(s) of the couplet, the *radīf*. In some cases, the simple adoption of a particular meter can associate the poem with another, well-known one. The *Ẓafar-nāmah* provides a perfect example of this association as it adopts the meter of the *Shāh-nāmah*, the poem that, as we have seen, provides the letter’s epic background. The case of Nand Lal’s *Divān* is somewhat different though as we can note in ghazal number three, which adopts the meter of what is perhaps Hafez of Shiraz’s most famous ghazal, the first in his collection, and comments upon it. This is a common technique in Persian ghazal poetry known as the *javāb*, or answer, which demonstrates a poet’s skill and adds robust texture to the poet’s ghazal. In “answering” Hafez’ ghazal, Nand Lal is providing an optimistic alternative to what our Sikh writer likely understood as the bleak prospects offered by the Iranian master’s poem (Fenech 1994).

Manuscripts of the *Divān-i Goyā* are usually combined with the second of Nand Lal’s most popular works, the *Zindagī-nāmah*, or *Book of Life*. The *Zindagī-nāmah* is a *mašnavī* – a heroic or didactic poem of rhyming couplets – made up of 510 distiches, the theme of which is living the good and proper Sikh life. This work may have been the first that Nand Lal wrote, a work that was initially offered to the Tenth Guru after our Persian poet had made his way to the Guru’s side in the early 1680s. According to Sikh tradition, it was originally titled the *Bandagī-nāmah*, or *Book of Servitude*, the title of which Nand Lal changed after having been persuaded to do so by Guru Gobind Singh, who saw in Nand Lal’s poetry the key to living the fulfilling Sikh life. Such a story no doubt makes Nand Lal the perfect candidate for preparing further guides to living the good life, a candidacy that later Sikh tradition embraces fully by assigning several such texts, *rahit-nāme*, to Nand Lal.

It is only in the *Divān-i Goyā* and the *Zindagī-nāmah* that Nand Lal appropriates the penname *Goyā* – in all others he writes under the sobriquet *Lal* (ruby in Persian but beloved in Punjabi – the name Nand Lal is also a nickname for the Hindu deity Krishna, “the beloved of Nanda”). It is quite

likely that it is based on these two works that Nand Lal's poetry was ultimately awarded the status of *bānī* although it remains unclear as to which (if not all) of Nand Lal's works occupy this position. There is one other too which may be included in this august list of *bānī*, and that is the *Ganj-nāmāh* or *Treasury Text*, the sole Persian text attributed to Nand Lal, which begins with an epigraph from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Guru Arjan's *Jaitsārī dī vār* 19, which appears on page 710 of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and sets the tone for the entire *Ganj-nāmāh*:

The Guru is Gobind, the Guru is Gopal; the Guru is Narayana, the one who pervades both this world and the universe entirely. Both compassionate and mighty beyond compare, the Guru O Nanak can even convey the fallen over the ocean of existence.

This *Ganj-nāmāh* is quite an intriguing text. Although manuscripts of this work are exceedingly rare, it was nevertheless regularly published in Gurmukhi script with Punjabi translations during the early twentieth century, a trend that persists to this day. Divided into ten sections, which are in turn divided into two parts for an overall division of 20 groups, the *Ganj-nāmāh* focuses a tenth to each of the human Gurus, each section beginning with the term *sultanat*, or "kingdom," followed by the numerical position of each Guru. And so *Sultanat Aval* (The First Kingdom) focuses on Guru Nanak, while *Sultanat Daham* (The Tenth Kingdom) turns its attention to the Tenth Sikh Guru. Perhaps the best known of the ten portions is the tenth, which highlights the glory that is Guru Gobind Singh, and it is best known since it is included in the early twentieth century *Amrit Kīrtan*, which prescribes which hymns are to be sung on which days throughout the year. It could not be otherwise with the poem's end rhyme of *Gurū Gobind Singh*:

ḥaqq ḥaqq āgāh gurū gobind singh/shahi shāhanshāh gurū gobind singh

Knowing the Truth that is God, that is Guru Gobind Singh/The Shah of all shahs is Guru Gobind Singh

Ganj-nāmāh 10:2:107 (Ganda Singh 1963: 123)

There are though a few other Persian texts that are attached to Nand Lal's name. These include the lengthiest of his works, the *Arzulalfāz* (Exposition of Terms), also a *maṣnavī* composed of over 1,300 distiches, which combines Persian, Arabic, and Indic terms in praise of the divine – and occasionally honoring Guru Nanak and the *Tausif o Sanā* (Description and Praise), which is predominantly in prose and likewise celebrates the divine. Although the whole of the *Tausif o Sanā* does likely not share the status of *bānī*, a portion of this text may be arguably placed within this esteemed category, the concluding portion rightfully called the *Khatimāh*, or conclusion, which unlike the *Tausif o Sanā* generally is in poetry. This final portion is quite short, only 21 *bāits*, but conveys Nand Lal's ideas about the Khalsa and is nicely aligned with the three Punjabi *rahit-namas* attributed to Nand Lal, although the latter could simply not be attributed to the Persian poet whose penname is Goya. By the time that these *rahit-namas* were allegedly prepared in the post 1699 period, Nand Lal had spent a lifetime establishing his reputation as a poet of high caliber. To diminish that reputation by producing three such substandard works seems, put simply, unthinkable.

There are as well two texts with the Punjabi title *Joti Bigās* (*Light Effulgent*), one of which is in Persian and the other in Punjabi. Although one would imagine that the latter is a translation of the former (or vice versa), the two are remarkably dissimilar, indicating that the Punjabi text, which is pedestrian in the extreme, is of a dubious authorship. The Persian *Joti Bigās* however, at least thematically, may be read as an extension of the *Ganj-nāmāh* in that it focuses in part on the person of all ten Sikh Gurus. It begins by presenting the well-known Sikh doctrine of the singular manifestation

of ten Nanaks, playing on the idea that was likely first articulated in the famous “enthronement” hymn of the Sikh bards Satta and Balwand (*Vār rāmkaṭī* 1, GGS, 966), which describes the movement of the *joti* or light of Guru Nanak into the subsequent Sikh Gurus, much like the movement of the flame of one candle to another. After this description, Nand Lal then describes all creation from the sky to the firmament and all sources of knowledge and literary characters drawn from both Indic and Islamicate texts united in praise of the Sikh Gurus who are in effect one, sharing the one light of Guru Nanak the light (*joti*), which became effulgent (*bigās*) in his nine successors.

Another questionable text is the final one under our purview. This is the *Dastūrinshā* (*Rule of Epistles*), which follows the popular Mughal epistolary format. This work is in prose, but as a guide to writing proper letters and other epistles, it does nothing to elucidate Sikh doctrine even though it may offer some insight into Nand Lal’s everyday life as a clerk prior to his arrival at the Guru’s court.

V

With the death of Nand Lal perhaps in 1713 CE, any further attempts to elucidate Sikh doctrine or to praise the Sikh Gurus in Persian comes to an end. This is likely reflective of the changing nature of the Mughal Empire and its slow decentralization after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, in which Persian’s elite status begins a gradual decline. The only text worth mentioning in closing is one that is spuriously attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, known as the *Amar-nāmah* (the *Immortal Text*), which was composed, or so it is claimed, in 1708, the year of Guru Gobind Singh’s death. This work was allegedly recited to one Sikh minstrel named Nath Mall, who apparently accompanied Guru Gobind Singh as the Tenth Master made his way to the Deccan to meet with the emperor Aurangzeb. The text itself is broken into two parts: the first 81 *bait*s are the *Amar-nāmah* proper, which discusses among other things the life of the Tenth Guru as he makes his way southwards in the early eighteenth century. During this discussion we also become privy to some of Nand Lal’s activities. The second portion is comprised of 65 *bait*s (for a total of 146 couplets), which are sometimes referred to collectively as the *Safar-nāmah*, or *Travelogue*, in which among other things is described Guru Gobind Singh’s encounter with the ascetic Banda, whom Sikh tradition today affectionately remembers as Banda Singh Bahadar.

It is likely the acrimony that was engendered by the Khalsa’s and Banda’s resistance to Mughal authority, which began to cast Persian and Mughal *mansabdārī* culture, which this language often helped convey, in a type of negative light we may easily infer from the *rahit-namas*. Such acrimony really ensured that Persian Sikh writers’ best days were in the past.

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CODES OF CONDUCT AND WAY OF LIFE

Eleanor Nesbitt

Introduction

Any attempt to describe the actual “way of life” of any community of, currently, over 24 million people would be high-risk. Instead, this chapter focuses on sources that have, in varying degrees of detail, and with a considerable continuity of emphasis, outlined how Sikhs should live.

The key word *rahit* (or *rehat*) is translated as “way of life,” “mode of living” (Malhotra 2005: 56), “customs” (Chann 2017: 183), and “code of conduct.” Scholars suggest that *rahit* comes either from *rah* (Persian for “road, law, rule”) or the Punjabi noun *rahini*, “a manner of living” (Chann 2017: 183 citing Padam rep. 1995). It sometimes means the requirements for Khalsa Sikhs, rather than for people who self-identify as Sikh without being *amritdhari* or bearing the five outward signs of this commitment.

The word *rahitnama* too is translated as “code of conduct,” though Naindeep Chann suggests the translation “book/letter of customs” for early *rahitnamas* (2017: 183). As Gurinder Singh Mann has pointed out, “statements about practice” constitute one of the five types of Sikh literature that developed early in the religion’s history (Mann 2008: 247). The *rahitnamas* belong to a sequence of expressions of Sikh *rahit* that begins with Guru Nanak and subsequent Gurus in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and continues into the twenty-first century with rulings from the Akal Takhat in Amritsar. Because of its major influence, *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Sikh n.d.) receives more attention in this chapter than other contemporary codes of practice and is the basis for comparative comment on several minority groups’ *rahits*. Another key term, *hukamnama*, refers both to the authoritative edicts issued by some Gurus and to directives, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the Akal Takhat. Some of these recent *hukamnamas*, and less binding rulings (*sandesh*), have particularly affected North American and UK Sikhs.

Sikh history (and hagiography) provides role models for courage as a warrior or *shahid* (martyr for the faith). Courage and endurance are promoted in written and oral tradition and in the artistic representations in the foyers of many gurdwaras and illustrating educational materials. Works of fiction too portray idealized Sikh behavior: Bhai Vir Singh’s novel *Sundari* provided role models for brave, devoted women and courageous men.

This idealized portrayal, as well as prescriptions and proscriptions in *rahitnamas*, in the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* and other (minority) codes, and in *hukamnamas*, need to be complemented by looking at actual practice. Mapping and understanding the ways of life of those who have self-identified as

Sikh over five centuries calls for both anthropological and textual approaches. Thus Nesbitt (2013) profiles salient emotions – those that have been permitted, encouraged (such as the optimistic spirit of *chardhi kala*), or masked – in Sikh experience and representation.

The Gurus' Emphasis in *Guru Granth Sahib*

The first recorded use of “*rahit*” in Sikh literature is Guru Nanak’s (Chann 2017: 183). In *Asa* 88 Guru Ram Das’s son, the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, exhorted, “Hear of the way [*rahit*] observed by the saints” (AG p 392). Nanak contrasts *gurmukhs* (the Guru-oriented, rather than self-centered) with *manmukhs* (preoccupied with ego or *haumai*). *Gurmukhs* practice *sachi rahit* (the “lifestyle of truth,” the true way). Truth dwells in the mind of the *gurmukh* (AG 831), and peace of mind is attained by following the *sachi rahit* (AG 1342). Eventually, a *gurmukh* may, through listening to *sabad* (the divine word), become *jivanmukta*, one who is freed, before death, from the cycle of rebirth. This depends on divine grace but also entails the *gurmukh* shunning *kam* (lust), *krodh* (anger), *lobh* (greed), *moh* (attachment to temporal things), and *ahankar* (pride).

A well-known (non-scriptural) summary of Guru Nanak’s teaching is *nam japo, kirat karo, vand chhako* (repeat the Name, do your work, share your earnings), an exhortation to live meditatively, industriously, and generously. Nanak’s verses reiterate the formula “*nam dan isanan*,” encapsulating the threefold priority of focusing on God’s name, giving to others, and also bathing – in the sense of both physical cleanliness and ethical living (Malhotra 2005: 71) plus spiritual immersion in the divine presence, rather than in the sense of ceremonial bathing at Hindu pilgrimage sites, something that Guru Nanak criticized. This formula is repeated in the early eighteenth-century *Nasihatnama* (see next section) and other formulations of *rahit*.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the ultimate authority for Sikhs’ lives. Guru Ram Das is often quoted as follows:

He who calls himself Sikh, a follower of the Guru who is true, should arise at dawn and meditate on the divine Name.

Every dawn he arises, and for his bath washes himself in the pool of amrit.

Obedient to the Guru’s teaching he repeats the divine Name.

He who repeats the divine Name with every breath is he who gives pleasure to the Guru.

(AG 305 in McLeod 2003: 29 and see Chann 2017: 184)

The *Guru Granth Sahib*’s emphasis on rising early, bathing, and meditating on the divine *nam* is unmistakable, as is the emphasis on integrity and service. Nonetheless, the *Guru Granth*’s poetic character is open to interpretation. Thus, regarding diet, both advocates of strict vegetarianism and meat-eaters find endorsement (see Nesbitt 2015). Nonetheless, *shabads* prescribing Sikhs’ “routine, lifestyle, and values” provided an authoritative basis for later *rahit* texts (Chann 2017: 183).

Pointers in *Janam Sakhis*

Rather than recounting actual events, the *janam sakhis* (stories of Guru Nanak) probably formed as imagined contexts for Guru Nanak’s exhortations in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. They offer “an interpretation springing from the piety and commitment of later generations” (McLeod 1980: 8). Certainly, the authors saw contextualization of his message as important. Some *sakhis* highlight honest hard work (McLeod 1968: 86–87), loyal fortitude (McLeod 1968: 50), the futility of material wealth (McLeod 1980: 125–127), and engagement in the world rather than spiritual seclusion or extreme

asceticism (McLeod 1980: 152–155). The miraculous element in many *sakhis*, however, contradicts the Gurus' emphasis on refraining from miracle-working.

In parallel with the development of *janam sakhis*, lists of required and forbidden behavior were written on blank folios of scriptural manuscripts (Mann 2008: 249). Sikhs were bidden to participate in congregational worship; to give generously to needy people; arrange marriages for unmarried Sikhs; help non-Sikhs join the *Panth*; pray for everyone's welfare and not to steal, commit adultery, slander, gamble, or consume meat or alcohol (Mann 2008: 275).

Bhai Gurdas Bhalla

Bhai Gurdas Bhalla (c. 1558–1636), Guru Amar Das's relative and a contemporary of Gurus Amar Das, Ram Das, Arjan Dev, and Hargobind, is considered the foremost interpreter of Sikh concepts, beliefs, and practices (Chann 2017: 184). He outlined the *gursikh* (ideal Sikh), the relationship between the Guru and his followers, the nature of the *sangat*, and the meaning of *seva* (Mann 2008: 248). In his *vars* (lengthy poems), Bhai Gurdas expanded Guru Nanak's injunction to rise early, bathe, and meditate. So he identified texts for internalization: in the early morning repeating the *Japuji* and at night chanting the *Arati Sohila* (BG 26: 4; McLeod 2003: 32; Gill 2017: 221). Moreover, a Sikh should join others in the congregation, work hard, and give to others (BG 40: 11; McLeod 2003: 33). He should speak gently, behave modestly, be honest, and avoid denigrating others (McLeod 2003: 32–33). Through its colorful imagery, Var 25 exalts humility, “*Gurmukhi hode tani nitani*” (“Gurmukhs are mighty, though meek”) (Gill 2017: 212, 219), and according to Var 17, those living in *rahit* are like a lotus above the surface of a pond, unlike frogs living in the filth (Gill 2017). Indeed, Gurdas deployed images from the plant world to commend noble qualities – the tree's serene loyalty when wronged (BG 26: 11; Gill 2017: 223) and the humble sugarcane's triumph over torture (BG 26: 12; Gill 2017: 223).

The Gurus' *Hukamnamas*

Most *hukamnamas*, that is, letters of command (McLeod 2003: 34), were issued from Guru Hargobind's time onwards to *sangats* and individuals (McLeod 1995: 107). Earlier examples have also survived (Mann 2008: 235, Chann 2017: 185). By this means the Gurus (and in the case of the ninth and tenth Gurus, their widows) gave instructions or requested help. The Gurus' *hukamnamas* include exhortations to donate generously to the Guru (McLeod 2003: 34–35) and to carry weapons when visiting him (H-n 169, 173, 175; McLeod 2003: 35). The Guru warns against dealings with *masands* (intermediaries between the Guru and his Sikhs) or their followers (McLeod 2003: 35). Chann and others identify the possible relationship of *hukamnamas* and *nasihatnamas* (see next section) with *rahitnamas*.

Eighteenth-Century *Rahitnamas*

Rahitnamas are traditionally regarded as providing the discipline outlined by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. They provided instructions meant to articulate and modify how Sikhs lived, individually and collectively, at that time. The *rahitnamas* set out rites, such as initiation with *amrit* (ritually empowered water). They listed weapons that must be carried plus specifying which sorts of people Sikhs must avoid and what actions were prohibited (*kurahit*). These taboos usually included eating *kuttha* meat (the flesh of an animal that had been ritually killed), cutting one's hair, committing adultery, and using tobacco. *Rahitnamas* listed the penalties (*tanakhali*) for such breaches of *rahit*.

The earliest “manual on the Sikh way of life,” probably from before Guru Gobind Singh’s death (Malhotra 2005: 65), is a “*nasihatnama*,” *nasihat* being Arabic for “sincere advice.” *Nasihatnamas* were produced not only in the Mughal court but also in an Ottoman context (Chann 2017: 186). Malhotra summarizes the 1718–1719 manuscript and translates the fully reconstructed text.

The *nasihatnama* commences with the respected Sikh, Nand Lal, asking Guru Gobind Singh to “tell me which are the commendable deeds, and which are not” (Malhotra 2005: 72), and it deals with “the religious life of the Khalsa, their ethics, and their political aspirations” (2005: 66). Much of it is intended for Sikhs more generally – for example, the forbidding of slander and the exhortations to practice charity, curb sensual pleasure, and discard pride, plus protecting the poor and being faithful to one’s wife. It includes instructions for preparing *karaha* (the cooked mixture of ghee, sugar, and flour distributed to the congregation) (2005: 73). However, rules for riding horses, bearing arms, and killing “Turks” are particularly for the Khalsa.

The dating of *rahitnamas* fuels ongoing discussion, with recent scholarship tending towards dates contained in these manuscripts (Mann 2008: 275), that is, earlier than previous (Western) scholars had argued for on the basis of their style and content (McLeod 2003). Chann calls *rahitnamas* “recognizably a product of the period around 1700” (2017: 183). The debate relates to the key question: how close the content is to Guru Gobind Singh’s articulation of *rahit*.

Rahitnamas were all written in Gurmukhi script, and almost all are in Punjabi. The genre includes both verse and prose, and their length ranges from 8 to 50 pages (Malhotra 2005: 56). Malhotra outlines differences between Sikh authorities regarding how many writings should be listed as *rahitnamas*, with the late nineteenth-century Kahn Singh Nabha referring to a collection of as many as 37 (Malhotra 2005: 56). Certainly, any list will include Nand Lal’s *Prashan Uttar* (“question and answer”) and *Tanakhah-nama*, the *Prem Sumarag*, and the *rahitnama* attributed to Chaupa Singh and Prahlaad Singh.

Nand Lal’s *Prashan-uttar* is dated December 4, 1694 (Mann 2008: 249). It is available in English at sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Bhai_Nand_Lal_Rahitnama (accessed October 1, 2019) plus being discussed by McLeod (2003: 44–46). Its focus is on Sikhs’ daily routine of *darshan* (reverentially being in the presence) of the Guru in the form of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and absorption in devotional recitation of scriptural passages, as well as *kirtan* (singing of scripture) and *katha* (exposition). Also attributed to Nand Lal is *Tanakhah-nama*, which lists offences incurring *tanakhah* (penalty of the Guru’s displeasure). The long list of proscribed behavior includes not participating regularly in the *sangat*, giving a daughter or a sister in marriage for money, not paying *dasvandh* (tithe), committing adultery, and not combing one’s hair twice a day.

The *Premsumarag* (McLeod 2006), “Path of Love,” also known as *Param Marg Granth* (Chann 2017: 188ff), or “Great Path,” may date from as early as 1701. Its ten chapters focus on daily routine, Khalsa initiation (*khande di pahul*), birth and naming, marriage (women’s widowhood and remarriage), preparing *prasad*, the physical world, death and funerals, details of inheritance rights, political conduct, justice, the (ecstatic) way of *sahaj* yoga, and intercaste marriage. The *rahitnama*’s tenor is devotional and philosophical. To quote from Chapter 1:

Do not regard your family as your own, whether son, wife, or any other member. The same applies to your wealth. Think of yourself as a traveller who has come in response to a command, as one who dwells here as a wayfarer staying briefly at an inn.

(McLeod 2006: 18)

The *Prahilad Rai Rahit-nama* (McLeod 2003: 285–290) lists prohibited behavior, including eating without reciting, as appropriate, *Japujī*, *Jāp* or *Rahirās*; associating with Minas (followers of Prithi Chand) or *masands*; and wearing red clothing or a *topi* (cap).

The *Chaupa Singh rahitnama* (or *Hazuri Rahitnama*) is dated 1700 (Mann 2008: 249) although McLeod dated it to between 1740 and 1765 (2007: 112). It comprises about 800 prohibitions, including female infanticide; drinking liquor; failure to maintain *kachh*, *kes*, *kirpan*, *bani*, and *sangat*. It insists unequivocally that the initiation of women by *khande di pahul* is an offence (McLeod 1987: 186). The *rahitnama* claims to be based on consensus and to have been approved by the Guru himself, and it consistently invokes the *Guru Granth Sahib*'s authority. McLeod provides a full translation (1987) and points to its special consideration of Brahmans (2007: 112) and Chann provides a detailed summary (2017: 187–189).

Another *rahitnama*, the *Sakhi Rahit ki* (McLeod 2003: 290–295), was often attached to manuscripts of the *Chaupa Singh rahitnama*. It too stresses how Sikhs' behavior must distinguish them from followers of other paths, through their dress, avoidance of non-Sikh rituals, tobacco, and shaving, and their unwavering focus on *nam*. McLeod also translated *Desa Singh Rahit-nama* (295–310) and *Daya Singh Rahit-nama* (310–325). The *Desa Singh Rahitnama*'s first command is to be initiated in the *khande ki pahul* rite. It describes a “man without *kes*” as “like a bird without wings, like a sheep without wool, like a woman without clothing” (McLeod 2003: 304) and details the (emphatically vegetarian) foods that can be prepared in the *langar* – including spinach, mustard greens, yoghurt, and pickles (McLeod 2003: 305). The *Daya Singh Rahitnama* prescribes how to administer *khande ki pahul*,

McLeod examined the evidence of successive *rahitnamas* (2003: 204 to 213) for mention of the Five Ks (outward indicators of allegiance, all starting with “K”). He found the first actual formulation in 1883, the time of the reformist Singh Sabha movement, although earlier *rahitnamas* had mentioned “five weapons.” Also, Sikhs' Khalsa practice may have routinely included most or all of what became the Five Ks. Other now central requirements for Khalsa Sikhs also crystallized because of the Singh Sabha, notably the *anand* marriage rite (acknowledged in law in 1909) and the name “Kaur” for females, as enshrined in *Sikh Rahit Maryada*.

Twentieth Century: *Sikh Rahit Maryada*

In 1927, Sikhs' main administrative body (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, or SGPC), appointed a subcommittee to formulate a new code of conduct (Chann 2017: 190). The 29 subcommittee members included the distinguished scholars Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha and Bhai Vir Singh, who had been influenced by the Singh Sabha and Akali movements. Moreover, the Shiromani Akali Dal and over 20 other Sikh organizations commented on drafts before *Sikh Rahit Maryada* was published in 1950 under the auspices of the Akal Takhat, the supreme corporate Sikh authority. For the full 1936 and 1990 versions, see Manvir Singh (2019: 287–312, 313–341).

Sikh Rahit Maryada's section on individual conduct starts by defining a Sikh as any woman or man believing in one God, the ten Gurus and their teaching, and in the *Adi Granth* (*Guru Granth Sahib*). The verb translated as “believe” is *manaṇa*, which also means “accept,” “profess,” or “agree.” A Sikh must also believe in/accept the importance of *amrit* (initiation) and not adhere to another religion. Echoing Guru Ram Das's words, *Sikh Rahit Maryada* states, “A Sikh should rise early, take a bath and then meditate on the one true God.” It lists the scriptural passages for daily reading or recitation, namely (in the morning), the *Japji Sahib* of Guru Nanak, and Guru Gobind Singh's *Jap Sahib* and ten *Swayye* (in the evening), *Rahiras* and, at night, *Sohila*. *Sikh Rahit Maryada* stipulates the behavior required (and prohibited) in the gurdwara. This includes how to take advice from the *Adi Granth* and, just as the *nasihatnama* had done, the recipe for the sweet wheat flour pudding (*karah parshad*) that worshippers receive.

Sikh Rahit Maryada prohibits Hindu-style practices, such as ceremonial bell ringing and image worship, as well as involvement in caste, astrology, and ideas of pollution. Also forbidden are cutting

children's hair and using intoxicants or tobacco, plus (female) infanticide, gambling, stealing, adultery, and child marriage. Life cycle rites are outlined, and Sikhs are exhorted to offer *seva* (voluntary service). *Langar* is described as both training people in *seva* and overcoming caste distinction.

The much shorter second part of *Sikh Rahit Maryada* briefly outlines community discipline, including initiation (*amrit sanskar*), *tanakhah* (penance for a disciplinary breach), and *gurmatta* (decision on a religious question).

Gender

Sikh Rahit Maryada's opening definition of a Sikh is inclusive and clarifies that initiation is identical for men and women, as well as mentioning the option for *amritdhari* women of wearing a turban. By contrast, Jakobsh has pointed out, most of the *rahits* dating from the early eighteenth century say nothing about female initiation (Jakobsh 2017: 245). Arguably, even during Guru Gobind Singh's period, women were required to take *amrit*, but subsequent *rahitnamas* were produced by misogynists. Exceptionally, the *Prem Sumarag* had clearly endorsed initiation for women (McLeod 2006: 26–27). However, the requirements of candidates were gender-specific: whereas male candidates were to be initiated by five Singhs, females required just one devout Sikh male to officiate. Moreover, while men must bear five weapons, a turban, and the *kachh* and take the name Singh, the women must wear black for the initiation ceremony and obey their husbands. Ritual details are provided too, in the *Prem Sumarag*, for the birth, marriage, and death of Sikh women (*PS* 13–27 and 53–54; Mann 2008: 250).

A list of “52 Hukams” attributed to Guru Gobind Singh during his final days in Nanded (Maharashtra) is displayed at Gurdwara Hazur Sahib in Nanded. The Chaupa Singh Rahitnama provides an earlier version of these “sundry aphorisms” (see McLeod 1987: 77–78 and 164–166). They include the injunction that all women, other than one's wife, be treated “as mothers and sisters.” This parallels similar commands in, for example, the *Nasihatanama* (Malhotra 2005: 74) and the *Prashan-Uttar* (24). Another of the *hukams* is “Do not subject your wife to cursing, or verbal abuse.” Unmistakably, they too are addressed to men.

Similarly, while the Namdhari *rahitnama* includes “women both young and old” (McLeod 1984: 129) in the instruction to commit key scriptural passages to memory, the exhortations to “respect the daughter or sister of another man as you would your own” and “do not sell or barter a sister or daughter” (McLeod 1984: 130) leave no doubt that the *rahitnama* addresses men.

Minority Groups

The Namdhari *rahit* exemplifies *rahits* of minority communities that share a Sikh self-identification. Distinctively, among *rahits* observed today, the Namdhari *rahit* specifies that marriages entail the couple walking around a fire – as was customary for most of Sikhs' history – see, for example, the prescription for kindling and circling the fire in *Prem Sumarag* (McLeod 2006: 38). The Namdhari *rahit* bans all meat (unlike *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, which bans only *kuttha* meat) and bans tea and coffee and dowries. The Namdharis' *rahitama* was issued from their headquarters at Bhaini Sahib by (Satguru) Ram Singh and begins with instructions for daily hygiene and recitation of *Jappi*, *Jap*, and *Shabad Hazare* (McLeod 1984: 129) and urges a forgiving, humble attitude. Unlike mainstream Khalsa Sikh *rahit*, it includes how to perform a *jag* (fire-centered ritual) (McLeod 1984: 130).

Mainstream Sikhs too disagree on points of *rahit*. In the late twentieth century some groups differed from the SGPC over which scriptural passages could be part of liturgy – in particular, over whether the Ragamala (a list of ragas at the end of the *Guru Granth Sahib*) could be read at the Akal

Takhat (Pashaura Singh 1996: 150). Groups disagreeing with the SGPC were the Damdami Taksal, Gurmat Sidhant Parcharak Sant Samaj, and Akhand Kirtani Jatha.

Damdami Taksal “upholds a version of the *rahit* that is significantly different from the standard manual and insists that it should be followed since it had been bequeathed to the Panth by Guru Gobind Singh when he inaugurated the order of the Khalsa in 1699” (Pashaura Singh 1996: 149).

Gurmat Sidhant Parcharak Sant Samaj (the “Society of Sikh Sants Preaching the Principles of the Gurus’ Teachings”), often called “Sant Samaj,” is a union of charismatic leaders (*sants*, *babas*) and *deras* (religious establishments that follow a particular *sant* or *baba*). Some Sikhs have criticized the Sant Samaj for including the Nirmalas and Udasis, two orders whose emphasis differed from other Sikhs. The Sant Samaj created its own *Sikh Rahit Maryada* in the 1990s. This lists 56 specific requirements regarding, for example, how to lay the scriptures to rest respectfully; which passages to recite at an *amrit* ceremony and how to change one’s *kachh*.¹ The Sant Samaj opposed replacing the Bikrami calendar (a Hindu lunar-solar calendar) with the Nanakshahi calendar, in which many dates remain unchanged, according to the dominant secular calendar, from year to year.

The *Gurmat Bibek* of another Sikh group, the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, requires *sarab loh*, that is, using only pure iron utensils to cook, serve, and consume food. *Gurmat Bibek* emphasizes *nam simran* and *akhand kirtan* (continuous hymn-singing) and its 5 Ks include *keski* (small turban) rather than *kes*, and so Akhand Kirtani Jatha women wear this. Members must eat only (the strictly lacto-vegetarian) food that has been prepared by Jatha members.

Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere (Jakobsh 2008) includes kundalini and tantra yet presents itself as true Khalsa, following *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Sikh Dharma’s distinctive practices are traceable to their founder, Harbhajan Singh Puri (1929–2004).

Veneration of successive *sants* and adherence to their rules characterizes two other twentieth-century groups: Nanaksar and Guru Nanak Niskam Sewak Jatha. According to the *maryada* on the Gurdwara Nanaksar website: there may be no *nishan sahib* outside a gurdwara “because it is a political symbol or an army flag”; *langar* must be brought from outside rather than cooked on the premises. The *Guru Granth Sahib* must be honored on a bigger scale than in other gurdwaras; alcohol is forbidden, and Sikhs’ diet must be strictly lacto-vegetarian (Nesbitt 2017: 380–385).

The emphasis of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (a body of people committed to selfless service) is on doing things properly rather than doing them differently from other Sikhs, but this reinforces slight distinctive differences from the Panth more generally (Takhar 2005: 48–54). Among these differences are the way in which *akhand path* (continuous 48-hour scriptural reading) is conducted, with women being barred from being readers and from preparing *langar* during it, and the veneration of the Jatha’s founder, Sant Puran Singh, and his two successors.

The 67 points listed in the *Nihang Rahit* include “When tying your turban you must sit in the lotus posture, your turban and kachera [breeches, *kachh*, one of the Five Ks] should never touch, and your turban should never be lifted off like a topi [the cap worn by Hindus] but should be properly untied” and “The dead hairs caught in your comb must not be thrown underfoot but should be cremated,” “One should dress in blue,” and “Any action should begin with ardaas to God, and Waheguru mantra is to be repeated with every breath whether walking, standing, he is to always be thanked” (www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?/topic/37293-nihang-rehat/ accessed 3 October 2019).

Recent Examples of *Hukamnama* and *Sandesh*

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Akal Takhat has issued directives, known as *hukamnama*, *adesh*, and *sandesh* (message). They reinforce the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* and rule against individuals and groups diverging from this discipline, for example by showing *beadbi* (disrespect)

to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. (For the originals and translations of many directives see Manvir Singh 2019.) A 1978 *hukamnama* prohibited Sikhs having contact with Sant Nirankaris, a group revering a living Guru. In 1980 it was ruled that *amritdhari* Sikhs may eat meat provided it is *jhatka*, that is, it is not *kuttha*. A 1997 *hukamnama* prohibited the use of chairs and tables in the *Guru-ka-langar*. In the following year, six Canada-based Sikhs were excommunicated for disobeying this ruling. Also in 1998, the Akal Takhat ruled that the *Guru Granth Sahib* must not be taken to any hotel or bar in order to conduct an *anand karaj* (marriage rite) or taken anywhere that alcohol, meat, and tobacco have been served or consumed. Another ruling prohibited Namdharis from conducting *kirtan* in gurdwaras because of Namdhari belief in living (*dehdari* i.e., “embodied”) gurus and in “*devi devte*” (Hindu deities) rather than in the ten Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

In 2004 Sikhs were barred from dealing with the Hindu political party, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), and the associated Sikh political party, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat. According to a *sandesh* in 2006, the *anand karaj* must only be conducted in a gurdwara. Also in 2006, a ruling condemned Ek Niwas temple in Wolverhampton, UK, for incorporating the *Guru Granth Sahib* where worship characteristic of other faiths was being performed. In 2006 too, misleading preaching about the *Dasam Granth* was condemned, and a *sandesh* was promulgated strongly reinforcing the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*’s rules about appropriate behavior in gurdwaras – no intoxicants or non-vegetarian foodstuffs allowed, no person under the influence of intoxicants to be permitted entry, the *langar* to be carried out “in accordance with the Gurus’ *maryada*”; only the recital of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, *katha* (expositions), *kirtan*, and recounting the history of the Gurus to be permitted and the premises to be used solely for “Gurmat purposes and the betterment of society.” The *anand karaj* must be performed in gurdwaras “in accordance with Gurmat and Sikh *maryada*,” and dancing, singing, or “any acts which go against the principles of *Guru Granth Sahib*” were banned.

In 2007 a *hukamnama* was directed at the head of Dera Sacha Sauda, a personality-centered religious establishment in Punjab. It condemned the Dera’s head for impersonating Guru Gobind Singh. A *sandesh* clarified that *anand karaj* can be conducted only for Sikhs and any non-Sikh must first adopt the Sikh faith and have “Singh” or “Kaur” added to their name on any identity documents. The following year, 2008, a ruling was given that the *Dasam Granth* could not be installed on an equal basis with the *Guru Granth Sahib*. According to a 2013 directive, any gurdwara seating (if required by the elderly and disabled) could only be on verandas, and the religious service would be relayed there via screens.

Tensions and Diversity

These prohibitions from the Akal Takhat indicate social trends (for example, marriages performed in hotels and other nonreligious venues and the provision of seating in gurdwaras). The edicts themselves have had turbulent repercussions: the killing of the Nirankari Baba in New Delhi, disturbance in Canada following the *hukamnama* banning tables and chairs in the *langar*, and in the UK, the disruption of “mixed-faith” marriages, after the 2007 *sandesh*. This in turn led to the UK’s Sikh Council issuing guidance in 2014 that marriages in gurdwaras can only be between two Sikhs.

Similarly, earlier formulations of Sikh *rahit* suggest what the contemporary social norms and trends were. Fuller understanding requires us to examine them in the context of their historical and geographical background, including assumptions about gender and caste, plus the Sikhs’ Hindu and Muslim context. One needs to consider the formative/reforming role of the Singh Sabha and Akali movements in the early twentieth century, plus the continuing impact of religious leaders (*sants*). Sikh *rahit*, for both individual and collective life, is not static or uniform: it evolves (Grewal 2010: 129) and diversifies, and scholars disagree about the chronology of any such evolution.

Twentieth and twenty-first century Sikhs' experience suggests too an interplay between three factors (Nayar 2010, Nesbitt 2011: 236 and Dusenbery 2008): namely, Sikh religious guidelines (*gurmata*), the dominant Punjabi culture (*panjabiat*), and "modernity," which overlaps with secularism and "Westernisation," now including the contribution of technology, notably the Internet, to Sikhs' lifestyle choices. These three tendencies can be mutually reinforcing – Dusenbery suggests that Sikh philanthropy is grounded in values integral alike to Sikh teaching, Punjabi culture, and Western ideals. However, *panjabiat* and modernity may converge in opposition to the Gurus' values: *izzat* (family honor) drives competitive consumerism, at odds with the Gurus' cautioning against *lobh* (greed) and *moh* (attachment). Young Sikh women are particularly likely to be pressured by the incompatible expectations (regarding, for example, dress and body language) of modernity as opposed to both traditional *panjabiat* and Sikh religious teaching (Nayar 2010).

Many moral dilemmas arise from unforeseen contemporary developments, in reproductive medicine for example (Jhutti-Johal 2011: 12–27, Nesbitt 2007). Increasingly, awareness of the climate emergency and environmental degradation necessitate acknowledgment and action by the religious establishment and stimulate discussion by Sikh scholars such as Pritam Singh (see <https://oxford.academia.edu/PritamSingh> for articles in Punjabi).

Continuities and Transformations

Meanwhile, continuing emphasis on *seva* (voluntary service) highlights the unifying strength and cross-generational adaptability of this central Sikh principle. Its powerful expression as *langar* in the gurdwara has extended into wider community service, for example, Bhagat Puran Singh serving infirm and disabled people in Amritsar in the twentieth century and Balbir Singh Seechewal's twenty-first-century environmental initiative of *kar seva* (service through physical labor) to clear the Bein river (Gobind Marg 2019). *Seva* has assumed a higher international profile through the hunger and emergency relief of such organizations as Khalsa Aid, United Sikhs, and (in the UK) Langar Aid and the Sikh Empowerment Voluntary Association.

Simaran (repeating *nam*) also continues and changes: for example (in the early eighteenth century), repeating "Guru Guru" in Banda Singh's *hukamnamas* (McLeod 2003: 39–40), or, as Tara Singh Bains, a Canadian Sikh, explained nearly three centuries later:

As soon as I get out of bed or even while I am in bed, prayer begins. My way of prayer is recital of gurbani (scriptures) from memory and simaran, which is the recital of his name. . . . That is just repeating a couple of words, "Sat Nam, Wahiguru" or "Wahiguru, Wahiguru" or "Ram."

(Bains and Johnston 2005: 217)

Likewise, the prohibition of hair-cutting and shaving is a strong, continuing principle, but with slight changes in wording about head coverings – whether the ban on wearing a *topi* or the inclusion of turban-wearing for women. Dietary rulings recur but with emphasis shifting between allowing even *amritdhari* Sikhs to eat meat, as long as it is *jhatka*, and banning meat consumption outright.

The observations of ethnographers, autobiographers, and novelists document the range of behaviors among those who identify as Sikh – including the pressures on women regarding spouse selection and marriage (Jasvinder Sanghera 2007), attitudes to mental illness (Sathnam Sanghera 2008), and women's life choices (Arora 2017; Puri and Nesbitt 2013).

Important as these insider accounts are, when considering Sikhs' way of life, this chapter's focus has been on official prescription and proscription. Seriously "committed" Sikhs' interpretation can

vary, but there is unity regarding the centrality of the Gurus' spiritual imperatives and some "key" distinctive features of Sikhs' way of life: mindfulness of *nam* (the divine Name), respect for the *Guru Granth Sahib*, service to others, maintenance of the *langar* and the distinguishing features of Khalsa Sikhs, and avoidance of some practices associated with other religions. Sikhs persevere in upholding courage, sacrifice, and service in the optimistic spirit of *charhdi kala*.

Note

- 1 For a reading of the whole document in Punjabi, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=Au7UyOpCdAw (accessed 21 March 2019).

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8

THE GURDWARA

Tejpaul Singh Bainiwal

Introduction

The Sikh world revolves around a single institution: the *gurdwara*, or “Door to the Guru.” It has continuously served Sikhs for the past 500 years as the institution of the gurdwara represents the very lifeworld of the Sikh Panth (community). In modern days, the gurdwara is most referred to as a Sikh place of worship. This understanding, however, drastically undermines its true nature. By recognizing it as simply a religious space strips away the importance of the gurdwara as a social, political, and cultural institution that constructs a Sikh’s world. To understand how the gurdwara came to be the central institution for Sikhs, this chapter will explore the following four points: (1) the history and evolution of the gurdwara; (2) the daily routine within a gurdwara; (3) the role of the gurdwara in a Sikh’s life; and (4) the different types of gurdwaras. First, this paper follows a historical approach to trace the formation and evolution of gurdwaras while exploring the social and historical context behind the institution. Beginning with the first site where Guru Nanak established a settled and lasting community of followers, this section will weave through significant periods of Sikh history to establish an understanding of the evolution of contemporary gurdwaras. Second, we will discuss the daily routine to offer readers a personal insight to what occurs within a gurdwara. Third, we analyze how the gurdwara is involved in every major part of a Sikh’s life – from birth to death. Finally, this paper will examine the different types of gurdwaras that have been established, including historical, diasporic, and caste-based gurdwaras. A thorough analysis of these different elements will demonstrate the importance of the gurdwara within the Sikh world.

The History and Evolution of the Gurdwara

After spending years traveling to preach the message of the divine Name, Guru Nanak finally settled at Kartarpur. It was here where Guru Nanak established a lasting community of followers and the first *dharamsala* (place of worship and gathering of early Sikh Panth). The dharamsala was at “the centre of Nanak-panthi faith and identity” (Hawley 2014: 318). The *sangat* (congregation) was an integral part of the dharamsala as Guru Nanak’s followers from across South Asia gathered at Kartarpur to listen to *kirtan* (devotional singing) and the Guru’s discourses. J.S. Grewal writes that “Guru Nanak used to sit on a platform made from pieces of bricks on which was spread a mat of

dry grass,” while a *rababi* (rebeck player) sung kirtan for the nearby congregation (Grewal 2006: 538). The congregation is inseparable from the dharamsala. Following the formation of Kartarpur as the central dharamsala during Guru Nanak’s time, subsequent Gurus began forming dharamsalas across Punjab and created new central cities for Sikhs. Guru Angad (r. 1539–1552) moved to his native village of Khadur after Guru Nanak’s death. Guru Amar Das (r. 1552–1574) established the town of Goindval, which became a pilgrimage center, before Guru Ram Das (r. 1574–1581) constructed the city of Amritsar.

Aside from the congregation and devotional singing, *seva* (selfless service) proved to be vital in every dharamsala.

Guru Arjan says that he has established the dharamsala of truth to which he brings the Sikhs . . . so that he may serve them by waving the fan, bringing water, grinding corn, and washing their feet, through God’s grace.

(Grewal 2006: 534)

This not only highlights the importance of selfless service but that of the parallel institution of *langar* (Sikh community kitchen), which provided the opportunity for voluntary service. The only reference to langar in the *Guru Granth Sahib* comes from Rababis Satta and Balvand in *Ramkali ki Var*:

The Langar – the Kitchen of the Guru’s Shabad has been opened, and its supplies never run short. Whatever His Master gave, He spent; He distributed it all to be eaten.

(GGs 967)

The dissemination of the Guru’s Word (*shabad*) is likened to the distribution of free food from Sikh community kitchen. Guru Angad preached the message of Guru Nanak to satiate the hunger of searching souls of individual Sikhs. The Rababis then recognize Mata Khivi (1506–1582) for her dedication to serving devotees langar and taking care of them as they came to Guru Angad’s *darbar* (court):

O Balwand, Khivi is the noble person, who gives soothing, leafy shade to all. She distributes the bounty of the Guru’s Langar; the *kheer* – the rice pudding and ghee, is like sweet ambrosia.

(GGs 967)

Mata Khivi helped institutionalize the Sikh community kitchen within gurdwaras. As the Gurus preached against the caste system and patriarchy, the 500-year-old anti-segregation movement brought people from different caste, gender, religion, economic status, and ethnicity together to share a simple vegetarian meal.

The final aspect that is inseparable from the gurdwara is also the most distinguishing feature, the triangular Sikh banner called the *Nishan Sahib*. The modern-day Nishan Sahib evolved from a *dhuja*, or flag, which was first erected at Goindval by Guru Amar Das as revealed by panegyrics of the *Bhatts* (bards) in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGs 1393). The Nishan Sahib “serves as a statement of the Sikh presence. It enables the traveler, whether Sikh or not, to know where hospitality is available. It is an assertion of authority, the principle of freedom of worship” (Cole and Sambhi 1995: 58). Although it is typically saffron or yellow, oftentimes the Nishan Sahib will be blue. Due to its significance, the Nishan Sahib flows high in the sky allowing individuals to spot it from a distance.

Beginning with Guru Ram Das (r. 1574–1581), there was a focus on establishing the city of Amritsar as the central city for Sikhs. When Guru Arjan (r. 1581–1606) compiled the *Adi Granth*

and installed it in Darbar Sahib (Amritsar) on August 16, 1604, it vastly enhanced the centrality of the Darbar Sahib. Guru Arjan declared, “The scripture is the Lord’s dwelling-place” (GGS 1226). The *Adi Granth* was ceremoniously installed at different dharamsalas as the *Adi Granth* became the center of Sikh worship (P. Singh 2006: 118). While the Guru was the central authority within the Sikh community, Guru Ram Das proclaimed, “The Word is the Guru, and the Guru is the Word” (GGS 982). From Guru Nanak to Guru Arjan, the Sikhs’ religious place was referred to as dharamsala. With the installation of the *Adi Granth* across several dharamsalas, during the time of Guru Hargobind (r. 1606–1644), the dharamsala came to be called gurdwara (Grewal 2006: 544).

The seventeenth century not only saw the shift from dharamsala to gurdwara but also the construction of the Akal Takht (the throne of the Timeless One) that became the seat of Sikh political power. The Guru was regarded as *sacha patisha* (true sovereign) in contrast to the false rulers of the world. The establishment of Akal Takht within the Harmandir Sahib complex, under the supervision of Guru Hargobind, only further solidified the political authority of the true Guru. With the *piri* (spiritual authority), Harmandir Sahib, directly across from the Akal Takht, Amritsar became the capital of Sikhs. Guru Hargobind militarized Sikhs and challenged the Mughal Empire with the Akal Takht becoming the temporal seat of authority (*miri*). The Guru and the congregation would meet at the Akal Takht to discuss politics and strategic responses to the Mughal Empire. To this day, the Akal Takht continues to be the highest seat of authority under the jurisdiction of the Guru Granth and Guru Panth (Sikh community).

From the Khalsa to the British Raj

From the time of Guru Nanak to that of Guru Gobind Singh (r. 1675–1708), the authorized representatives of the Gurus had control of the gurdwaras. Upon the institutionalization of the Khalsa, the control was transferred to local Khalsa Sikhs. With the emergence of the Sikh rule, the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century witnessed the construction of gurdwaras at sites associated with the Gurus such as Takht Sri Patna Sahib. Funded primarily by Sikh rulers, sites associated with prominent Sikh martyrs and martyrdoms were also built to commemorate their contribution, such as Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib. Management of these gurdwaras was given to Khalsa Sikhs. For example, the management of gurdwaras in Amritsar was delegated to Jassa Singh Ahluwalia (Grewal 2006: 543–545). During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, he patronized Sikh scholars like Bhai Sant Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Kavi Santokh Singh, and various musicians at Harmandir Sahib and adorned it with gold, thus earning its name “Golden Temple.” After the annexation of Punjab, the physical institutions survived, but the primary functions disappeared (Grewal 2006: 544). Gurdwara properties began to be used as personal property, where unholy and immoral acts were frequently committed.

British administrators passed the Waqf Act of 1861, which allowed the Hindus and Muslims to care after their respective places of worship while stripping this right from the Sikhs (Petrie 1969). The management of gurdwaras throughout Punjab were transferred to *Mahants* (clergy-cum-managers) who had a complete indifference to Sikh practices or beliefs. As a matter of fact, “misappropriation of funds and deviation from Sikh norms became common practice” (NK Singh 2011: 152). As Sikhs became aware of the sacrilegious acts occurring in gurdwaras, they wanted to free the gurdwaras from Mahants patronized by the British. In order to match the dominance of the Mahants and the British authorities, Sikhs were in dire need of an organization whose primary purpose was to take back control of their gurdwaras. In this context, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh writes the following:

The Sikh Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was constituted on 15 November 1920 with 175 members, to manage and reform Sikh shrines. The removal of Hindu images, icons, practices and ideologies was crucial for its members. They fought tragic battles against the Mahants and the British administrators to take control of Sikh shrines, and re-establish the Sikh essentials in their sacred spaces.

(NK Singh 2011: 152)

With the formation of the SGPC came the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920–1925), also known as the Akali Movement, which was a campaign specifically geared towards bringing reform to the gurdwaras. The campaign was met with hostility from Mahants and British authorities as a series of violent tragedies occurred – the Nankana Sahib Massacre (1921), *Guru Ka Bagh* (1922), and *Jaito Da Morcha* (1924) – killing hundreds of Sikhs. Following these events, complete control of gurdwaras was eventually passed to the SGPC through the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925. The SGPC became the “authoritative voice” of the Sikhs and is currently responsible for the management of gurdwaras in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh and the union territory of Chandigarh.

Sikh Women and the Gurdwara

Another aspect to consider is the significant role that Sikh women played in the early formation of the gurdwara. As mentioned earlier, Mata Khivi was instrumental in the institutionalization of the community kitchen. To further expand Sikhi, Guru Amar Das started the *manji* system (seats of authority) and appointed several Sikh women to these seats who “taught Guru Nanak’s message, looked after the congregation in their jurisdiction, and transmitted the disciples’ offerings to Goindval” (NK Singh 2011: 25). Following the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur (r. 1664–1675), Mata Gujri took control of social, political, and religious affairs until Guru Gobind Singh was of age. However, Punjabi patriarchy seems to have crept its way into gurdwaras. Sikh women are found doing selfless service in the community kitchen or cleaning up the gurdwara, typical “women duties.” W.H. McLeod notes that gurdwaras are “largely controlled by men, while the women must content themselves by singing gurbani and serving in the langar” (McLeod 2007: 195). Female spiritual leaders and committee members are practically nonexistent. Sikh women are not banned from holding any positions from the president of SGPC to a *granthi* (functionary in charge of a gurdwara) but do not hold them due to centuries of oppression. There are a few exceptions, such as Bibi Jagir Kaur (SGPC President) and Bibi Baljeet Kaur Khalsa (prominent Sikh musician).

Daily Practices and Routine Within the Gurdwara

In this section, first we will analyze daily practices before a brief discussion about the daily routine inside the gurdwara. At early hours of the day, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is taken from its resting location to the main platform by Sikhs in attendance. Throughout the day Sikhs follow a similar pattern before entering the gurdwara: devotees will remove their shoes, cover their heads (if they are not wearing a turban), wash their hands, and oftentimes bow or touch the base of the Nishan Sahib and shine the shoes of devotees. When Sikhs first enter the gurdwara and approach the raised platform where the Guru sits, “devotees perform *matha tekna* by going down on both knees and bowing low until their forehead (*matha*) touches the ground in front of the scripture” as a sign of humility and submission (NK Singh 2011: 81). Then, devotees will sit on the floor to listen to kirtan (devotional singing) and/or *katha* (exegesis) followed by a *hukamnama* (Divine Order) being read out to the congregation. At the end of the day, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is taken from the main platform into a

back room for the night, and the congregation begins preparing for the next day by cleaning the hall while some share a meal in the community kitchen hall. These practices remain constant throughout the entire year at every gurdwara in the world.

To understand the daily practices of the gurdwara more, hukamnamas of the later Gurus and prominent Sikhs (Baba Gurditta, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, Mata Gujri, Mata Sundari, and Mata Sahib Devi), from the 1630s to the 1730s, that reached Sikhs from Punjab to Bihar: “The Sikhs are instructed to go to the *dharamsal* every day, to perform *kirtan* and *Arati Sohila* and to celebrate *Gurpurabs*” (Malhotra 2013: 380). Daily, Sikhs attend the gurdwara and sit on the floor to listen to *kirtan*, the central mode of worship inside a gurdwara. *Kirtan* is the singing of sacred hymns that derive from the *Guru Granth Sahib* or other accepted scriptures, such as Bhai Gurdas’ *Vars* and *Dasam Granth*. Guru Nanak began this tradition as he traveled across South Asia singing hymns with Mardana, accompanying him on the rabab. During the time of Guru Arjan, Darbar Sahib (Amritsar) became the central institution in Sikh liturgy as “Guru Arjan established eight ‘sittings’ (*chaunkis*) to sing *kirtan* as part of daily routine at Amritsar” (P. Singh 2006: 119). These eight sittings – *Asa di var di chaunki* (early morning), *Bilaval di chaunki* (after sunrise), *Anand di chaunki* (before noon), *Sarang di chaunki* (noon), *Charan Kanwal di chaunki* (afternoon), *So Dar di chaunki* (sunset), *Kirtan Sohile di chaunki* (night), and *Kanare di chaunki* (late night) – are considered to be permanent and are still practiced to this day at Darbar Sahib (Amritsar). While one can witness these sittings at Darbar Sahib (Amritsar), most gurdwaras practice less. Furthermore, along with the decrease in the number of sittings, the use of traditional instruments such as the rabab, dilruba, and taus are not as common in gurdwaras. Following the introduction of the harmonium, it has become the instrument of choice within gurdwaras. Another common practice witnessed inside the gurdwara includes *katha*, an exegesis of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Following the singing of devotional hymns and an exegesis, a hukamnama (Divine Order) of the day will be read out to the sangat, which is done by reading a randomly selected section of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Malhotra notes that the Divine Order “was treated with veneration and preserved as a sacred relic” (Malhotra 2013: 380). Divine Orders, which Sikhs heard from the Guru, served as a primary source of comfort and motivation for the community. The gurdwara served to be an instrumental part of the Sikh world for centuries.

Role of the Gurdwara in a Sikh’s Life

From birth to death, the gurdwara plays a consistent role in a Sikh’s life with respect to life cycle rituals: name-giving, *amrit sanskar* (Khalsa initiation ceremony), *anand karaj* (“Ceremony of Bliss,” Sikh wedding ceremony), and *antam sanskar* (death ceremony). After the birth of a baby, the family will attend the gurdwara to do *ardas* (prayer), followed by a Divine Order. The first letter of the Divine Order depicts what the baby’s name will begin with. For example, if the first word is “*hari*,” the family will choose a name that begins with the letter “H.” While some families who have *Guru Granth Sahib* at their residence may practice the name-giving ceremony at home, they will still attend the gurdwara as soon as possible for blessings. The next two ceremonies – *amrit sanskar* and *anand karaj* – typically take place at the gurdwara. At the end of a Sikh’s life, following cremation, the family of the deceased will attend the gurdwara for a final prayers for the departed soul.

Beyond these major life milestones, some Sikhs may also utilize the gurdwara for other matters such as “resolving disputes and undertaking welfare work” as well as smaller milestones throughout their lives (Malhotra 2013: 380). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, gurdwaras across the world became “a major source of food for millions of people” (Bainiwal 2020: 25). Sikhs utilized

gurdwaras as the primary location to store, cook, and distribute food to those in need during the global pandemic. Meanwhile, at the micro-level, Sikhs will come to the gurdwara for blessings after graduation, buying a car, or whatever smaller milestone they celebrate. A Sikh's life will always bring them back to the gurdwara as it is inseparable from the Sikh world.

Some gurdwaras also serve as a valuable resource for the Sikh youth. While there is limited research available on the specific data of youth who regularly attend the gurdwara, Jasjit Singh (2014: 45) acknowledges several methods that gurdwaras use to transfer the Sikh tradition to the youth:

- 1 Punjabi supplementary schools
- 2 Specially organized children's services
- 3 Teaching in the main gurdwara program focused on children
- 4 Sikh youth camps
- 5 Music classes
- 6 The provision of library facilities

One or more of these methods may be used by different gurdwaras. The most common practice is Punjabi (or Khalsa) schools. Although their primary focus seems to be preserving the Punjabi language, some teach Sikh history and philosophy as well as kirtan, *santhiya* (the study of gurbani), and gatka (Sikh martial arts). In an interview with a Sikh youth, Singh demonstrates why parents are willing to send their kids to gurdwaras that are further in distance but offer more services for the youth. Puran, from England, described how

tabla [drums] class, vaja [harmonium] class, Sikhism class, Punjabi school and gatka were really influential. . . . For a young person like myself at the time, it was really welcoming and it was so basic that everyone could understand. . . . I started to get inspired 'cos I started learning about Sikh history and I could see how much people had done for us to be able to stand here today as Sikhs . . . so that's when I started to grow my hair.

(J. Singh 2014: 46)

Despite the positive impact these classes have had, gurdwara politics occasionally hinders the ability for these classes to occur as instructors are directly affected by the factional politics of gurdwaras, which creates an unstable environment as

those teaching young Sikhs in gurdwaras will at some stage need to affiliate to one faction or another results in little stability in teaching provision. As committees change, those affiliated to the outgoing committee are replaced with people who curry favour with the incoming committee.

(J. Singh 2014: 47)

Another key concern that the Sikh youth seems to have with gurdwaras is the language and cultural barrier. The congregational worships are almost completely in Punjabi with examples being unrelatable for second and third generation diasporic youth (Singh and Tatla 2006: 90). This has led individuals and organizations to host camps, conferences, or other Sikhi-related events at the gurdwara that allows the youth to engage in learning more about their religion and talk to their peers. From major and minor milestones to youth-oriented events, the gurdwara continues to play several different roles in a Sikh's life.

Different Types of Gurdwaras

The final section will look at the different types of gurdwaras in the world. Upon doing research on Sikhs in Varanasi, Kristina Myrvold found that there are two different types of gurdwaras: those significant to the Gurus, prominent Sikhs, and Sikh history. While the second, and most common, type of gurdwara was built to serve religious and social needs of the community (Myrvold 2007: 154–156). The former category is limited to countries in South Asia such as India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. A majority of gurdwaras, and all those in the West, fall under the second category as Sikhs began immigrating to other countries during the British Raj. The first category includes (1) birth and death places of Gurus and prominent Sikhs, such as the birthplace of Guru Nanak – Gurdwara Janam Asthan in Nankana Sahib, Punjab, Pakistan; (2) events related to Gurus, such as the location of the birth of Khalsa – Takht Kesgarh Sahib in Anandpur Sahib, Punjab, India; and (3) events related to prominent Sikhs, such as the location marking the martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh's younger sons – Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib in Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India. These gurdwaras are irrefutably described as historical (*itihāsik*); however, some gurdwaras in the West, which started off simply to serve religious and social needs of the community, are now considered to be historical. During the British Raj, Sikhs migrated to other countries by the masses, and establishing gurdwaras in their respective countries was crucial. For these immigrants, gurdwaras were more than a place of worship. For early immigrants, it fulfilled many needs – it met their religious needs, their ability to congregate (for religious, social, and political purposes), provided free meals, contacts, and accommodations for those in need and was the one location Sikhs could go for unconditional and unwavering assistance. Many earlier gurdwaras in the diaspora were built in a true community effort by struggling settlers and were extremely crucial to their world.

The first gurdwaras in Canada and the United States are prime examples of how gurdwaras in the diaspora were started. The Vancouver Sikh Temple was the first gurdwara in Canada, established in 1908; however, seven other gurdwaras were established in British Columbia by 1920 (Jakobsh 2012: 98). The early Sikh Canadian immigrants survived and thrived due to their strong foundation, which can be traced back to the gurdwaras. They became centers for human rights advocacy as the community used that platform to fight against legislated racism and discrimination in labor, immigration, and citizenship. Stockton Gurdwara was established in 1912 and is recognized as the first permanent Sikh American settlement and gurdwara in the United States. The Stockton Gurdwara has operated continuously as a place of worship, acting as a cultural and historical resource for new immigrants and subsequent generations of Sikh Americans. It serves as a combination place of worship, dining hall, rest home, employment information center, meeting place, political forum, and sanctuary. Unlike Canada, Stockton Gurdwara remained the only gurdwara in the United States until the mid 1940s, serving thousands of Sikh immigrants as a port-of-entry. Similarly, other gurdwaras in the diaspora were the sole institutions for Sikhs in their respective areas, which allowed Sikhs to progress regardless of the country they immigrated to. The sheer memory and history behind these diasporic gurdwara elevated them to gain historical status amongst the Sikh community.

The second category of gurdwaras are like the Vancouver Sikh Temple and Stockton Gurdwara but hold no significance beyond its purpose to serve religious and social needs of the community. Within these, Jasjit Singh (2014: 44) recognizes the diversity amongst gurdwaras and divides them even further into the following categories: (1) mainstream, (2) caste based, (3) *sant* (saint) led, and (4) *jathebandi* (subgroup within the Sikh community). Although Singh's article is specifically focused on gurdwaras in Britain, these categories are applicable to gurdwaras across the world. Mainstream gurdwaras are not linked to any particular group or sect within Sikhi, and the congregation comprises of individuals from different backgrounds and ideologies. The second category, caste based

gurdwaras, are those that are managed and attended by members belonging to a specific caste. Although the Gurus sought to abolish the caste system that had oppressed individuals for centuries, present-day Sikhs continue to allow the Punjabi culture to seep through and stain Sikhi as strict caste-based gurdwaras have been built across the world and continue to ostracize those who do not belong to their caste. For example, management of Jatt (farmer) gurdwaras will be members of that caste that will attract other Jatts. Sant (saint) led gurdwaras revolve around a certain saint as it is managed by either the “sant or by people entrusted by the sant (this differs from a committee as this is usually via a process of selection rather than election)” and the congregation is a variety of caste groups, but they all follow this saint (J. Singh 2014: 44). The final group mentioned by Singh, jathebandi (subgroup) gurdwaras, are institutions that are linked to a specific subgroup within the Sikh community. The management of these gurdwaras are by individuals who share this common ideology and affiliate themselves with specific *maryada* (code of conduct). These groups differentiate from mainstream gurdwaras as the former tends to keep to their specific ideology, whereas the latter may be more willing to switch practices. Over the past few decades, there has been a rise in factional fights within gurdwaras and the broader Sikh community. These often occur due to the diverse group of Sikhs and gurdwaras mentioned previously. Ideological differences have also led to arrests, gurdwaras being shut down, and the creation of new gurdwaras. The diversity has become a source of separation for some Sikhs but also an outlet for those who are more comfortable with attending the gurdwara with Sikhs who have similar views.

Conclusion

Gurdwaras are capable of being a great resource for the entire community, whether Sikh or not. As the community continues to diversify, the gurdwara will adapt as it has done so in the past with historical contingencies helping to form the present-day gurdwara. However, the fundamental institutions that are inseparable from the gurdwara – the congregation, its relationship to the Guru, the community kitchen, and the Nishan sahib – will remain constant. The gurdwara and its associated institutions are vital to the Sikh faith. The Sikh world revolves around the gurdwara. It has continuously served Sikhs for the past 500 years as the institution of the gurdwara represents the very lifeworld of the Sikh community. This chapter weaved through the historical, social, political, and cultural importance of the gurdwara within the Sikh world. From the time of Guru Nanak, Sikhi has evolved to become a world religion with 25 million followers spread throughout six continents. With the original handful of dharamsalas in Punjab, gurdwaras can now be found across the world as they continue to function as a religious, social, and political space for all Sikhs. As the central institution of the Sikh world, the gurdwara is inseparable from Sikhs.

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9

THE *NAGAR KIRTAN*

Gurbeer Singh

Introduction

The *nagar kirtan* is a practice that is now an inseparable part of the global Sikh community (Panth). The Punjabi word *nagar* is translated as “town,” and *kirtan* is “devotional singing.” A *nagar kirtan* is when *kirtan* is done in a parade fashion through a neighborhood, village, town, or city. It is also known as a *jaloos* (from its Farsi derivation), in which the *Guru Granth Sahib* is paraded around during the singing while thousands of devotees will be in attendance. *Nagar kirtans* take place throughout the whole world and are a way the community can collect and celebrate a Sikh festival or, more recently, be a stage for activism, protest, and social reform. With a massive turnout, *nagar kirtans* have become one of the most important ceremonies for the Sikhs. This chapter will analyze the history, the format of the procession, the ceremonies, and the social context of the *nagar kirtan*. I use information collected from participant observation and from other scholars and sources to frame the history and purposes, manifest and latent, of the *nagar kirtan*, especially in the West.

The *nagar kirtan* is an essential part of the Sikh world. It is one of the few ceremonies that is universally experienced by Sikhs across caste, country, and levels of practice. It is experienced in every Sikh village and town in Punjab and anywhere in the diaspora with a significant Sikh population. It is one of the most popular methods of celebration throughout the Sikh world.

History

The earliest form of a *nagar kirtan* in the Indian subcontinent is of the Vaishnav saint Chaitanya (1486–1534) and his processional *kirtans* that would take place in the city of Navadip, now known as West Bengal. This procession eventually became a mode of resistance against the Brahmins and Mughals of the area as they had banned the public *kirtans* in Navadip. To protest this ban, Chaitanya sent out 12 of these processions at once, all leading to the governor’s palace, where the Mughal authorities eventually ceded and legalized the practice (Singh 2011). Though because of criticism, Chaitanya renounced the world, became a *sanyasi* (mendicant), and stopped partaking in this procession, this practice of public *kirtans* is still widely practiced amongst Bengali Vaishnavas (Kinsley 1993).

There is not much scholarship or historical sources on *nagar kirtans* in the Sikh tradition, but the earliest form of such a procession is the precursor to *Chaunkī Chāṛhnī*, defined by Pashaura Singh as “mounting or marching of the chaunki,” which was started as an act of peaceful protest (Singh

2011). This *chaunki* would be a procession of a group of Sikhs being led by a torchbearer and a flag bearer. The burning torch symbolized that the Mughal government was in darkness in arresting the sixth Guru. Baba Buddha, the first *Granthi* (“Reader”) started this procession when Guru Hargobind was jailed in *Gwalior Fort*. The Guru was jailed as he was seen as a threat to the state as the Guru had militarized the Sikhs and created political institution (e.g., the *Akal Bunga*, now known as the *Akal Takht*). To protest the captivity of the Guru, Sikhs would march and sing devotional hymns starting from the *Akal Bunga* to *Gwalior Fort*. The direct descendent of this practice is still occurring at the *Akal Takht* every day within its precincts, as Sikhs sing devotional hymns in folk tunes around the complex (Singh 2011). This is most likely the precursor to what *nagar kirtans* are today.

Though there is not any source that depicts the first *nagar kirtan* in India, it may have just been a normal practice within villages and gurdwaras to have processions of singing hymns, like *Chaunki Charhni* or *Parbhat Pheris* (early morning processions). The earliest *nagar kirtan* in the West was in Downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1905, and this *nagar kirtan* is depicted on a postcard dated 1908, as shown in Figure 9.1 (Canadian Souvenir Postcard 1908).

After this *nagar kirtan*, many other *nagar kirtans* began to take place in other cities in North America; they spread to Victoria, Yuba City, New York, Selma, Stockton, and so on. *Nagar kirtans* are now found in almost every city where there is a gurdwara. The *nagar kirtan* developed from being a humble gathering of Sikhs singing hymns down the road to a grand festival filled with many floats, food, and people. Originally only hymns from Sikh scripture were sung, but now one can see *dhadi vars* (ballads sung with a *sarangi* and a *dhad* drum), speeches, and other forms of discourse at *nagar kirtans*.

During the state of emergency enacted by Indira Gandhi in 1975, Sant Kartar Singh Bhindranwale would hold *nagar kirtans* as a way of protesting Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party, and the state of emergency, as large gatherings were forbidden during the emergency (Judge 2005). This act is associated with the rise of tension between the Damdami Taksal and the Congress Party. These tensions would eventually lead to Operation Bluestar in June of 1984.

Nagar kirtans are now held all over the world in almost every city where there is a large Sikh population. Throughout Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France,



Figure 9.1 Picture courtesy of Simon Fraser University.

Italy, Germany, and a plethora of other countries across the world, there are masses of *nagar kirtans* happening throughout the year. Gurdwaras hold their *nagar kirtans* annually, and Sikh masses know during which weekend and which gurdwara is having their *nagar kirtan*, even without the help of advertisements or announcements.

2017 Yuba City Nagar Kirtan

I spent time doing ethnographic research, specifically participant observation during the 2017 Yuba City *nagar kirtan*. The Yuba City *nagar kirtan* is one of the oldest and largest *nagar kirtans* that takes place in the Western world. This section is based on my observations of the preparations and the *nagar kirtan* itself.

The preparation for the *nagar kirtan* started weeks in advance at the gurdwara. In the days leading up to the *nagar kirtan*, parts of the community got together to listen to *katha* (exegesis), *kirtan*, partake in *langar* (communal kitchen), change the cloth on the *Nishan Sahib* (Khalsa flag), clean the gurdwara, and other preparations for the *nagar kirtan*.

Two days before the *nagar kirtan*, there were hundreds of stalls selling a variety of goods that are difficult to find outside of Punjab; *gutkas* (prayer books), Punjabi books, Punjabi shoes, articles of faith, Sikh art, Punjabi cultural items, turban cloth, and many other goods usually exclusive to Punjab are found. There are also many foods stalls present, where devotees are given a large variety of food for free, following the tradition of *langar*. Almost every single kind of Punjabi and many types of Western delicacy are found. The shops and stalls would only continue to grow in number, patronizing up until the *nagar kirtan* itself.

On the morning of the *nagar kirtan*, the *Guru Granth Sahib* was taken ceremonially from the gurdwara to the main float. The *Guru Granth Sahib* was then ceremonially opened, a *hukamnama* (divine command) was taken from the Guru, and the procession commenced. The devotees left at the gurdwara during the procession either sat in the main hall listening to *kirtan*, eating *langar*, or shopping in the stalls. Many elderly people and families with young children stay behind as it is difficult for them to make the journey with the *nagar kirtan* as it extends for a few miles.

The *nagar kirtan* was a procession made up of dozens of floats. It was usually led by the *Panj Piare* (Five Beloved Ones), who represent the Guru in physical form. The *Panj Piare* were followed by the main float, which contained the *Guru Granth Sahib* and *Ragis* (musicians) who were singing *kirtan*. In front of the *Panj Piare*, devotees were sweeping the street to make sure that the streets were clean for the Guru and the congregation. Though some of the congregation stayed back at the gurdwara, most of the congregation walked along with the *nagar kirtan*. Those that were right behind the main float listened to and sang along with the *kirtan*.

The main float was followed by many other floats, which were organized by other gurdwaras, Punjabi schools, Sikh student associations, other Sikh organizations, or just by families and friends. Some floats were meant for the congregation to sit on instead of having to walk along with the procession. Floats that were meant for sitting also had *dhadis*, *ragis*, *kavishars* (poets), people giving speeches, or just sound systems with playlists of *kirtan*, Sikh devotional music, or modern takes on *dhadhi vars* playing throughout the procession. Other floats depicted historical events, historical sites, or were meant to raise awareness about an organization or movement. These kinds of floats are becoming very common, especially within the diaspora. Here is an example of a float done by the University of California, Merced Sikh Student Association, depicting the *Amrit Sanchar* (initiation ceremony) that was done by Guru Gobind Singh to create the Khalsa.

Almost every float had some type of music playing or speech being given. The *nagar kirtan* also had a float for the *gatka* (Sikh martial arts) teams who perform throughout the whole procession.



Figure 9.2 Picture taken by the author.



Figure 9.3 Winners of a Gatka Competition at Yuba City *nagar kirtan*, photo by the author.

Along the route, many food stalls gave out traditional Punjabi food, fruit, drinks, ice cream, and Western foods. One can usually find every type of food along the route of a *nagar kirtan*. Devotees left the *nagar kirtan* with full stomachs and even took some food home. There were also pickup trucks dedicated to just cleaning up and collecting the waste.

Once the procession was back at the *gurdwara*, the congregation started to disperse after eating or doing a little more shopping. Then volunteers went along the route and around the *gurdwara* cleaning up any mess that was left behind.

Sikh Festivals

Nagar kirtans almost always revolve around some Sikh holiday. The most popular time to have a *nagar kirtan* is usually *Vaisakhi*. *Vaisakhi* is the day that the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, had initiated the Sikhs into the order of the *Khalsa*. *Vaisakhi* is one of the most popular Sikh holidays and is a perfect time to have a *nagar kirtan*, as *Amrit Sanchar*s (initiation ceremonies) are also kept then, so Sikhs that have gathered can be initiated into the *Khalsa*, the initiated order of the Sikhs. *Vaisakhi* has always been a very important holiday for the Sikhs, which explains why the most grand of celebrations would be saved for *Vaisakhi*. Though other religious and cultural celebrations are held on the surrounding weekends, the highlight of any *Vaisakhi* celebration is the *nagar kirtan*.

Other major holidays that *nagar kirtans* may take place on are *Gurpurbs* (anniversaries of the Gurus), *Gurugadhi divas* (the day the Guru was given the Guruship), or *Holla Muhalla* (a martial holiday). All these holidays have been celebrated by Sikhs throughout history. These holidays are a means of congregating Sikhs so they can engage in worship and meditation. Celebrating the birthdays of the Gurus can be traced back to the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla. *Gurpurabs* are brought up several times in his writings, for example:

Having love and devotedness, they celebrate the *gurpurabs* (anniversaries of the Gurus), The remembrance of God, charity, and holy ablutions are habituated in the mind.

(Bhalla n.d.)

Within the first stanza of the first chapter of his writings, Bhai Gurdas expresses the importance of celebrating the *Gurpurabs*. It is meant for a time of loving devotion and meditation. This loving devotion now arises out of the Sikh community in the form of *nagar kirtans*. Sikhs gather from far and wide to come together as a community and celebrate the same holidays, but in a new manner.

Celebrating holidays in a community setting has been a very important part of the Sikh tradition since its origins, and so has the public singing of *kirtan*. Now, when thinking of *Vaisakhi*, one of the first things that comes to mind is *nagar kirtans*; this is how deeply embedded this public act of devotion and celebration has become in the minds of Sikhs everywhere.

Personifying the Guru

The Sikh scripture is seen as the living embodiment of the Guru. The light of all ten Gurus is manifest in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is meant to hold the same reverence and valor as did the living Guru. The Guru is there in the times of all need and is taken guidance from in the form of a *vak* or *hukamnama*, which is when the *Guru Granth Sahib* is opened at random, and the verse that it opens to is considered the command of the Guru. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is seated on a throne, moved in a palanquin, and has a whisk waved over it to give it royal honor and dignity. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is even held as a juristic person in India (Singh 2008).

For the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is the ultimate source of authority. Its text is revered to be the living Guru and the king of all kings. The word *jaloos*, which is also used for *nagar kirtans*, was a word used for the processions of kings and royalty. The Sikhs used the same word for the procession of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which shows that the Sikhs considered the *Guru Granth Sahib* superior to the kings and queens of the time. Kristina Myrvold (2008) equates the *nagar kirtan* to a *processional cortège*, which is when a king or other royal person is taken through a city with their advisors and assistants to legitimize their authority and power over the people and to create a dialogue between royalty and the common person of the area. The King-Guru passing through the neighborhood or city accompanied by their Sikhs is the perfect representation of the Guru's reign over that area. The float for the *Guru Granth Sahib* is usually very high and creates a symbolic meaning that the Guru is higher than all and watches from above. Those sweeping and cleaning in front of the float are the King-Guru's servants making sure that the place the king is treading is clean and fit for royalty.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* being taken through a neighborhood is a way of asking the Guru to bless the neighborhood. Just as the *processional cortège* allows for the subjects of royalty to interact with the royal, the *nagar kirtan* allows the surrounding neighborhood and community to come and interact with the Sikhs, learn about the Guru, and the Guru's teachings.

Manifest Functions

Robert Merton's theory of manifest and latent functions helps explain the intentions and consequences of the *nagar kirtan*. For an event of its size, there is indubitably going to be intended functions and unconscious/unknown functions. The most manifest function of a *nagar kirtan* is to bring together the Sikh community of an area to celebrate, worship, and meditate upon the Gurus, just as Bhai Gurdas mentions a Sikh should do on a *Gurpurb*. Even in announcements, one of the main lines used is "*Aa ke Guru dian khushian parapat karo*" translating to "Come and obtain the blessings of the Guru." The concepts of devotion (*bhagati*), community (*sangat*), and meditation (*simran*) are brought up countless times in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and a *nagar kirtan* is an event that is meant to encompass all those concepts.

Another manifest function of some *nagar kirtans* is being a form of activism and being a political arena. As Gurveen Kaur Khurana explains, "[The *nagar kirtan* is] an arena to present difference and distinction as well as a forum for the diaspora to address its political, social, and cultural grievances" (Khurana 2011: 231). Giani Kartar Singh Bhindranwale used *nagar kirtans* in order to protest the state of emergency. Environmental activists have held *nagar kirtans* along the Kali Bein rivulet to raise awareness to environmental issues and environmental preservation of the Kali Bein (Dugal and Kanozia 2012). Baba Buddha used his procession as a form of protest to pressure the Mughals to release Guru Hargobind from Gwalior fort. Now, *nagar kirtans* are a way to create awareness about the tragedies of June and October 1984, where thousands of Sikhs were killed. Most *nagar kirtans*, at least within the diaspora, have floats, speeches, *kavishris* ("poetic recitations"), and *dhadi vars* ("martial ballads") that are meant to spread awareness about the events of 1984. *Nagar kirtans* within the diaspora will also have many people shouting slogans of independent state, trying to reawaken Khalistan that has long faded away in Punjab. At any *nagar kirtan*, one can easily spot pictures of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Sukhdev Singh Babbar, and many other leaders, activists, and militants who were active from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Another manifest function of a *nagar kirtan* is creating awareness of the Sikhs within larger local communities. When speaking to organizers of *nagar kirtans*, one reason someone will most likely hear for having the *nagar kirtan* is for community outreach. At any *nagar kirtan* in the West, one can

easily spot non-Sikhs within the crowds enjoying the foods, smells, and sights. Having such a grand procession attracts the attention of the whole community; it is practically impossible for a person to miss thousands of people marching down a street singing and handing away food for free.

Informing the community of who the Sikhs are is an essential part of the *nagar kirtan*. For example, at the *nagar kirtan* in Fowler, California, there is a stop at a local park in the middle of the city. During that stop, a stage is set up where a portion of that stage time is given to English-speaking Sikhs to speak about the basic tenets of Sikhism and who the Sikhs are, as lots of the non-Sikh community is gathered at the park to enjoy the foods and the sights of the *nagar kirtan*. In Italy, the Sikh community created booklets and leaflets in Italian to hand out to the community during the *nagar kirtan* that explained what the *nagar kirtan* was and taught the basic tenets of the Sikh faith (Ferraris and Sai 2014).

Latent Functions

Like all other activities and events, the *nagar kirtan* also has latent functions. One of which is the creation of a home in a foreign land. Khurana (2011) explains in her chapter that the *nagar kirtan* allows the diaspora a feeling of being home and being connected to their homeland, Punjab. It creates a familiar space for those that left their homes behind. At a *nagar kirtan*, one can indulge in foods that they only had in Punjab, see people in the clothing of Punjab, be surrounded by the Punjabi language, and buy goods from stalls that are typically only found in Punjab. The bazaar feeling of the stalls helps to add to this feeling of home at the *nagar kirtan*. For the few days that the *nagar kirtan* preparations are taking place and the day of the *nagar kirtan*, one is immersed into a little Punjab, which alleviates some of the pains of being away from the place a person called home.

Another latent function of the *nagar kirtan* is the preservation of Punjabi cuisine within the diaspora. Though there are people who go to *nagar kirtans* solely for the food, the food itself has never been the intent of the *nagar kirtan*, and certainly not the preservation of it. Living within the diaspora, a Punjabi household may consume a few of the many kinds of Punjabi foods mixed with varieties of Western food. *Nagar kirtans* allow for all foods that are made in Punjab to be prepared and fed to the masses. Foods that one may have forgotten about otherwise or may not have been able to eat since being in Punjab find their way to the *nagar kirtan* and allow immigrant devotees to be reminded of the cuisines of Punjab and introduce the diasporic youth to it. Food is one of the most prominent parts of a culture as it tells of the land that the food came from, and the *nagar kirtan* allows that culture to be revived and kept alive every year. The *nagar kirtan* also allows Western-born Sikhs to experience a fully immersive event where they can feel the connection with the homeland of their families and stay connected to their culture while growing up in Western worlds.

The *nagar kirtan* of the West has come with latent functions that may not be viewed so positively by all: the *nagar kirtan* turning into a cultural fair, rather than a religious celebration. For many, if not most Sikhs, the *nagar kirtan* has become a place to socialize, eat, play, and go home. When one goes on Sikh TV channels and watches the interviews from *nagar kirtans*, Sikhs are asked what event or day is being celebrated. Most people are left with blank faces and no answers. One may answer *Vaisakhi* but is unable to elaborate on what *Vaisakhi* is. The devotional aspect of the *nagar kirtan* is vanishing and becoming solely a cultural fair. This is most likely due to the mass growth of the food and the shops at *nagar kirtan* where the people attending forget about, or do not bother to learn about, the purpose of that *nagar kirtan* as they become distracted by the shops and the many varieties of food that the *nagar kirtan* has to offer. In my own experience at a *nagar kirtan* in Fowler California in 2016, my university's Sikh Student Association had conducted an experiment asking whether

people knew the purpose of the *nagar kirtan* that was happening, which on this occasion was Guru Nanak's birthday. Over 50 different groups of people were asked, but only two of them were able to successfully answer the occasion of the *nagar kirtan*. When Myrvold (2008) explains the reasons why Sikhs attend *nagar kirtans*, the entertainment, social, cultural, culinary, and aesthetic aspects of the *nagar kirtan* are the most prominent answers given, and responses about the devotional (manifest) aspect of the *nagar kirtan* are not as prominently found, which shows where the focal point of these processions is moving towards.

Nagar Kirtans as a Platform for Activism and Politics

For the past few years (besides during the COVID lockdowns), there has been a *nagar kirtan* happening in downtown San Francisco annually at the beginning of June to remember the events of 1984, to create awareness, and to promote Khalistan. Though *nagar kirtans* before would have elements of Khalistan and events of 1984 in them, this is a new wave of *nagar kirtan* whose main goal is to remember the Sikh victims and militants of the late twentieth century and to promote Khalistan. Though one can argue that this politicization of the Sikh tradition is a new one, the concept of *dha-dhi vars* has always been known to be of a political and activist nature, and that tradition is very old within the Sikhs (Kalra and Nijhawan 2007). The existence of the *Akal Takht*, the political center of Sikhs, is evidence that the Sikhs are meant to be a political people as well.

The Sikh tradition has always been one of activism and revolution. From Guru Nanak rejecting the *janeu* (sacred thread for Hindu men) to Guru Gobind Singh standing up against battling the Mughals and the Rajputs, the Sikhs and their Gurus have pushed rebellion and activism in their teachings and their acts. This spirit of activism lives in the Sikhs today, and the *nagar kirtan* is a platform for that.

This activism does not always have to be controversial. There have been instances of a group of Sikhs at the Yuba City *nagar kirtan* raising awareness about caste equality and the Gurus preaching against the caste system (Khurana 2011). The equality of castes is not a controversial topic within the Punjabi-Sikh community anymore, but caste discrimination is still practiced in many Sikh households.

Political activism is also a massive factor in the *nagar kirtan*. Sikhs invite politicians to the *nagar kirtan* not only to let the politicians speak but to show them the number of voters that Sikhs make up. This has proved quite successful in *nagar kirtans* in places such as Surrey, BC, as when 300,000 are on the streets, concerns expressed to politicians and authorities will be heard. Sikhs in Canada have achieved many successes in policy making. In Canada, Sikhs are allowed to wear their *kirpan* on airplanes; *kirpans* are allowed in all public places, in some parts of Canada, and Sikhs can wear their turbans instead of helmets while riding a motorcycle. A major factor in these policy changes would have to be the massive congregation of voters that *nagar kirtans* cause. It is a place for the voice of Sikhs to be heard.

This activism relates to the teaching of *Miri* (power) and *Piri* (holiness) by Guru Hargobind. This is also known as the Saint-Soldier aspect of the Sikh tradition. The *Miri Piri* concept is perfect for describing the processions led by Baba Buddha from Amritsar to Gwalior. While holding a political protest, he sang devotional hymns, a mixture of the political struggle and holy devotion. The *nagar kirtan*, in the same way, allows a platform for both *Miri* and *Piri* to be practiced. *Piri* is practiced through the kirtan and worship of the Guru in the whole procession. The *Miri* is in the speeches, the slogans, the floats, and the various other forms of activism and protest that take place at a *nagar kirtan*.

Conclusion

The *nagar kirtan* has immense significance in the Sikh community. It brings the entire Sikh world together, regardless of the background of the Sikh. It is a universally appreciable ceremony that connects the Sikh to their tradition and their community. It allows for a space for discourse, connection, and the display of devotion to the Guru.

The *nagar kirtan* is a ceremony that was not created by the Gurus but has become an essential part of Sikh celebrations. The devotion, music, singing, food, and shops make up what a *nagar kirtan* is. From its humble beginnings in the West in Vancouver where a few men got together with a *dholki* (drums) and *khartals* (*tambourine-like wooden clappers*) and sang through the streets, to what the *nagar kirtan* is now, a magnificent show of floats, colors, food, and people, the *nagar kirtan* is a celebration that has become the main celebration by the Sikh population in any city.

The *nagar kirtan* is the center of Sikh activism and politics, especially in the West. It is a time to reach large portions of the Sikh community at the same time and continues to fuel the Khalistani movement and other Sikh activist movements. The meaning of the *nagar kirtan* is so much more in the diaspora, as it is a piece of home outside of home for those that have left Punjab. It allows one to immerse themselves in an experience that connects them back to their roots without having to visit Punjab. The event also preserves Punjabiness and Sikhness for Sikh youth born in the West, whose interactions with Punjab are quite few and rare.

What evolved from Baba Buddha's *Miri Piri* protest to Gwalior becoming today's *nagar kirtan* stages where people speak of activism and the struggles of the community. The Sikhs show their devotion to the Guru through the Guru's parading in the neighborhood, asking for blessings. The Guru, personified as King, makes his way through the city inspiring Sikhs to stay devoted and re-enforcing the supremacy of the Guru over the world. The *nagar kirtan* allows the Sikh community to come together in numbers to not only reminisce about home but allow themselves to have a voice, to be heard, and recognized in the community.

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PART II

Global Sikh Communities



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10

SIKHS IN INDIA

Birinder Pal Singh

By definition, a Sikh must have faith in *Guru Granth Sahib* and believe in the ten gurus. A *sahajdhari* Sikh with shorn hair believes likewise. In popular perception, a Sikh (male) must have beard (may be trimmed) and turban. An *amritdhari* Sikh following *rehat*, code of conduct, has superior religious status. Between the two ideal types – *amritdhari* and *sahajdhari* – there are variants in vogue with some Sikh symbols and features of Sikhism in different combinations thereof (McLeod 1989).

Sikh Population in India

The Sikhs in India are 2,08,33,116 (2011), that is, 1.72% of the total population, a decline from 1.9% in 2001. At all India level, their rural and urban percentages are 1.79 and 1.57 respectively. Their growth rate of 8.4% in 2011 fell from 16.98% in 2001. The Sikhs are perceived to be doing well economically by the non-Sikhs even if their dalit and tribal counterparts are living in slums. Surinder Jodhka justifies, “Of the major religious communities of the country, the proportion of poor among the Sikhs is lowest . . . only 5 percent of rural Sikhs and around 6 percent of urban Sikhs were recorded to be below the poverty line” (2009: 7).

In Punjab there are 1,60,04,754 Sikhs comprising 57.68% of its total (2,77,34,338) population in 2011. Their population in rural and urban areas is 77.15% and 22.84% respectively. Of the total Sikh population in India, 76.82% reside in Punjab. There is not a single state, big or small, without their presence. J.S. Grewal writes the following:

For every twenty Sikhs in the Punjab there are no more than four in the rest of India and not more than one in the rest of the world; among those who live outside, there are not many who do not have their roots in the Punjab.

(1990: 1)

Mizoram, the far-off eastern state, has their lowest population (286). Other peripheral states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Kerala, and Goa also have Sikhs varying from 1,000 to 4,000 persons. Of all the union territories, Andaman and Nicobar Islands have 1,286 and Lakshadweep eight Sikhs only. Chandigarh too, though Punjab’s capital with more than a million people has a mere 1,38,329 Sikhs. The states adjoining Punjab – Haryana, Rajasthan,

Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh – have Sikh population between more than half a million to 1.24 million. Three states, viz. Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Maharashtra have Sikh population hovering around a quarter of a million each. Madhya Pradesh has 1,51,412 Sikhs. They count about 58,000 in Gujarat to 80,000 in Himachal Pradesh through West Bengal, Chhatisgarh, and Jharkhand. At the all India level, Sikhs are primarily rural inhabitants (71.67%). This is also true of the neighboring states, like Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, as also in some farther states like Sikkim, Nagaland, and Tripura. But in majority states, the population of Sikhs settled in urban areas is much higher than in rural areas. However, in Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur, there is quite a balance between their populations in the rural and urban areas.

Of the total 20.8 million Sikhs in India, more than 4 million are spread all over the country and an additional about 5 million are estimated to be abroad. They started migrating out in the second half of the nineteenth century. J.S. Grewal informs: “Thus, though it is possible to see a Sikh in every state of the Indian Union and in almost every country of the world, the great majority of Sikhs reside in the Punjab, their ‘homeland’” (1990: 8). The most cherished destinations of the Sikhs abroad over the last more than seven decades have been UK, USA, Canada followed lately by Australia and New Zealand. The mass exodus of students from Punjab with Sikhs in majority picked up with globalization over the last two decades. In 2018, about 150,000 students with Sikhs in majority moved out of Punjab on study basis with the idea and hope of never returning.

The Sikhs are ever ready to move out in search of wealth and prosperity, never mind the hazards they undertake for settlement. The Jatts (peasants) moved out to Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh clearing forests for agriculture. They moved to the hostile area of Kutch (Gujarat) at the insistence of the then prime minister L.B. Shastri (1964–1966). Recently, the Akal Farms encompassing 6,000 acres (called mini-Punjab) has been set up in the Ramnad district of Tamil Nadu. The cheap land, 3,000 kms from home, attracted these farmers (*The Hindu*, July 10, 2015). It seems migration is in their genes. Baba Nanak himself trekked about 34,000 miles seeking and disseminating knowledge.

The Sikhs are an adventurous and enterprising people who are never seen begging. They have altruism following the principle of welfare of all (*sarbat da bhala*). Khalsa Aid, an international NGO established in 1999 (UK), carries out relief work in war-affected and natural disaster areas anywhere in the world. Sri Aurobindo remarks, “The Sikh Khalsa . . . was an astonishingly original and novel creation and its face was turned not to the past but the future” (1990).

Sikhs in Punjab

The relation of Sikhs and Punjab is so bonded that shrinkage of the state area has led to their concentration. They were a minor component of the state population in 1881. The Muslims dominated with 47.60% followed closely by the Hindus at 43.80%. The Partition of country divided Punjab into eastern and western states belonging to India and Pakistan respectively. The former had about 35% Sikhs in 1951 that rose to 60.21% in 1971 despite the formation of Haryana in 1966 comprising the Hindi-speaking population. These demographic changes due to political machinations have greatly influenced the relations between the two communities imbued with communalism. The Punjabi language got identified with the Sikhs and Hindi with Hindus. The divide is not waning still.

The legacy of two-nation theory has influenced the Sikhs and the Punjab significantly. Besides the communal nationalism affecting India and Pakistan, the relations between communities too remain strained. Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) championing the cause of Punjab is taken as fighting for the Sikhs. Its demand for Punjabi-speaking state (Punjabi Suba) was dubbed anti-national by the government. Subsequently, the Hindus opted for Hindi as their mother tongue. The Hind

Samachar Group of papers champions their cause and the Punjabi press (Ajit) of the Sikhs. Both have headquarters at Jalandhar. The polarization deepened with the rise of Sikh militancy (1978–1993). The Punjab–Punjabi–Sikh nexus gets juxtaposed to Hindustan (India)–Hindi–Hindu formation. The latter is labelled nationalist/integrationist and the former anti-nationalist/disintegrationist by the Indian government (Singh 2002).

The Operation Blue Star in June 1984 by the Indian armed forces was an attempt to neutralize the Sikh militants allegedly fighting for Khalistan, the Sikh homeland. Subsequently, the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984 triggered the all-India killings of Sikhs by her supporters and the Indian National Congress. These incidents affected the location and movement of Sikhs in the country. Earlier they moved freely and settled anywhere to seek prosperity. Consequently, numerous Sikhs from other states migrated to Punjab, while the Hindus moved out. The former population rose by 2.2% and the latter fell by 2.47% from 1981 to 1991. Many Sikh families returned after a few years' unsuccessful attempt to settle in Punjab. These two incidents in the Sikh history have significantly influenced their orientation to life, work, and settlement outside Punjab in India.

The Sikh population in Punjab touched the highest mark (62.95%) in 1991. In the censuses of 2001 and 2011, their population fell from 59.91% to 57.69%, while the Hindu population rose from 36.94% to 38.49%. The decline in Sikh numbers may be attributed to political and economic reasons. During the 1980s and later, the Sikh youth were harassed by the police and implicated in false cases of terror and extortions. It made them run out. Many sought asylum abroad on political grounds. The state persecution coupled with agrarian crisis pushed the youth abroad. Moreover, post-green revolution, Punjab could not meet the rising expectations of the youth for employment and standards of living. They were desperate to move out irrespective of its cost, legality, and morality. The majority victims (175) in the Malta Boat Tragedy (1996) are believed to be from Doaba in Punjab. Presently, all towns across Punjab are brimming with shops teaching English, qualifying IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and immigration/visa consultants. The NRI (nonresident Indian) tag elevates the status and prestige of a person and her family. Two menaces currently afflicting the Sikh peasantry are the failed NRI marriages and the drugs.

The Sikhs (57.68%) dominate in Punjab. The remaining are Hindus, and minor percentages of Muslims and Christians. The males are 52.45% and females 47.54%. Their sex ratio is 906, which for the country is 902/1000 males. This ratio for Punjab is 895 in 2011 and 876 in 2001. Fatehgarh Sahib district had the lowest sex ratio of 854 in 2001 and 871 in 2011.

The Jatt Sikhs as peasants are predominantly rural residents and engage primarily in agriculture and allied occupations. The green revolution benefited the peasantry in its early phase that facilitated their progeny to move to urban areas for education and employment. Later, the upper middle and large farmers' families gave their land on *theka* (contract) and settled in the cities, preferably Chandigarh. The agricultural income was invested there to buy showrooms, commercial/residential plots, transport business, etc. The educated Sikhs joined the armed forces and professional services, including technical and administrative.

The villages have virtually become an abode of those who could not move out. The dwindling infrastructure and decline in government institutions is responsible for the loss of rural vitality. The green revolution has now turned against the farmers. The water table is falling drastically and consistently, and the farmers are committing suicide. The youth are given to drugs and violence. Numerous gangs of young men are operational in the state. But the growing Punjabi music industry is singing paeans of Jatt dominance with guns and violence amidst women, luxury cars, and palatial bungalows in the foreign lands.

Caste in Sikhs

The Sikhs in urban areas are 22.84%. The Khatri Sikhs engage in business of the wholesale and retail besides small-scale industry and related merchandise. The partition of India (1947) resulted in mass migration of Khatri Sikhs from west Punjab. The Maharaja of Patiala greeted the refugees with open arms, resulting in their concentration in the city. They are colloquially called *bhapas* since they address their father/elder brother similarly. Initially, this term referred to Sikhs from Rawalpindi, the business center but gradually encompassed all Khatri – local or migrant – who were not Jatts. The *bhapa*s excel Banias, the local trading community, in business acumen. These two communities have tacit economic conflict that manifested in Hindu-Sikh riots (1982–1983) for the first time in their history, even when the Sikhs are called “a sword arm of the Hindus.” The Jatt-*bhapa* divide is conspicuous too though without conflict. The former consider themselves superior. They do not intermarry. The SAD, however, had two strong factions – Sant Fateh Singh (Jatt) and Master Tara Singh (*bhapa*) – besides others. The latter remained the undisputed leader of the urban Khatri Sikhs until his death.

In the late 1960s, the Jatt Sikh youth started trimming their beard while supporting the turban with shorn/unshorn hair. Turban was removed in the foreign lands only. Subsequently, it became a norm here as well, followed by the clean-shaven anglicized face in the twenty-first century. The Khatri Sikh youth, however, keep their form complete without cutting and trimming of hair. Even now few amongst them do so. The converts to Sikhism too are particular about their form. The Jatts and Mazhabis are least serious about it.

The Sikh religion played a significant role in diluting the caste identity compared to Hinduism but failed to eliminate it altogether. The castes amongst Sikhs are as conspicuous as among Hindus and with similar nomenclature. These were not cast off with modernization either. The caste identities have resurfaced vehemently to the extent of becoming violent. The gurdwaras too have been divided on caste lines. There was manifest conflict between the Jatts and the scheduled castes (SC) in the gurdwara management at Talhan (Jalandhar). The issue of Dera Ballan of the Ravidassias gained transnational prominence with the assassination of Sant Rama Nand at Vienna in May 2009. The conflict involving distribution of village *shamlat* (common) land to the SC landless agricultural workers is now becoming frequent and violent. There are separate gurdwaras, *janj ghar* (accommodation for marriage party) and cremation grounds for the SCs in the villages. From the 1950s until today, things have not changed for good (I.P. Singh 1975; Jodhka 2002; Madhopuri 2004; Judge and Bal 2008; Ronki 2010).

It is true that untouchability is hardly practiced overtly in Punjab. Pettigrew (1975) suggests that Jatt Sikhs are least concerned about it as they often share the same glass for drinks in the field. The brewing is often done by the SC labor, now employed annually. The Jatt Sikh women are more bothered about the caste dimension, but they too engage SC help for domestic chores like cleaning the floor and utensils, though rarely for cooking. But this is no taboo in urban areas. What I.P. Singh (1975) notes in the late 1950s in an Amritsar village, a single Jatt family employing a Mazhabi to clean utensils has now become a norm almost. Jodhka attests, “Empirical studies on caste relations in Punjab confirm that the ideas of purity and impurity are rather weak in the region” (2009: 13).

The Sikh SCs have two major groups, the scavengers and the skin tanners. The former are called *chuhars*/Mazhabis and the latter *chamars*/ad-dharmis. The latter are dominant in Doaba. The Sikhs are called Ramdasias and the Hindus, Ravidassia. They are more educated and economically well off than the Mazhabis. They monopolize the skin trade in Jalandhar City. They have migrated abroad in significant numbers. Their place of worship is a gurdwara where the *Granth Sahib* is replaced by *Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji*. Mazhabis believe in the regular gurdwara though they have

no inhibitions in worshipping the Hindu gods and goddesses, especially Durga/Kali. The landless Mazhabis prefer to work as annual labor with the landholders, but the ad-dharmis prefer daily wage labor. Of the other backward classes (OBC), the Ramgharias are most skilled and prosperous entrepreneurs. They make good mechanics and builders. The colonial government took them to far-off places for laying the railway tracks and construction of refineries. They are *The Mobile Men* of Saberwal (1976).

The tribes totalling 520,948 persons in 2011 are denied presence by the Punjab government though their habitation is well documented by the census 1881. Their social structure, culture, religion, and occupations are characteristically distinct and different from the mainstream society. They are Kashtriya Rajputs from Chittorgarh (Rajasthan), but the government has clubbed them with the SCs. The majority tribes were nomadic who were forced to settle down under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871. Bazigar Banjara, Bauria, and Sansi with largest population are the erstwhile “criminal” tribes now called denotified tribes. Their numerous members have adopted Sikhism even if their own deities remain important (Singh 2010). The Gujjars too have adopted Sikhism to an extent, while some other tribes have shown no inclination. The Sikligars are committed Sikhs who were brought in its fold by Guru Hargobind for making weapons.

The Sikh religion does not permit belief in a living Guru, but on ground there are about 750 deras in Punjab. Their heads are addressed as “guru ji” or “maharaj ji.” No doubt the majority followers are from the low castes and classes, but higher ones also seek their blessings. The sheer size of deras’ committed followers endears them to the political elite who patronize them for votes. The SAD (Badal) and Dera Sacha Sauda controversy is brewing still. This dera was established in 1948 with headquarters at Sirsa, now in Haryana. The present head is currently in jail for certain alleged crimes.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the rise of Sikh militancy is attributed to the killing of orthodox Sikhs by the followers of Sant Nirankari Mission, whose chief was later killed by the militants. The mission was established in 1929 in Delhi to realize universal brotherhood through *Avtar Bani*, the holy book. It believes in formless god to be realized through a Guru. Another dera of significant following is Radha Soami Satsang Beas established in 1891. It focuses on the spirituality of religion and realization of god through a Guru. These deras professedly preach vegetarianism, spiritual humanitarianism, and welfare of humankind.

The Punjab Census 2011 classifies working population as main workers, marginal workers, and nonworkers – 32.40% Sikhs are main workers; the marginal workers are mere 5.80%; followed by 61.80% nonworkers who may be students, infants, elderly, pensioners, etc. Interestingly, these percentages are coincident with their all India distribution viz. 31.96, 5.74, and 62.30 respectively. The working population in Punjab may further be classified under three heads – primary, secondary, and tertiary. The primary sector comprising agriculture, fishing, mining, and quarrying has 53.29% Sikhs, while the secondary sector has 17.14% engaged in manufacturing, construction, wholesale, and retail trade. The tertiary sector is a large category including professionals, administrators, and others engaged in providing services of sundry type. It has 29.57% Sikhs.

At the all India level, of the total Sikh population of seven years and above, the literates are 60.56% and illiterates 39.44%. The corresponding figures for Punjab are hardly different at 58.67% and 41.33% respectively. More males are literate (65.02%) than females (55.55%). These literacy rates are about 2% lower for each category in the state. A look at the break up of data for the literates at all India level shows that those who have passed class/grade V (primary) are 26.03%, and 28.51% have qualified matric/higher secondary (class/grade X). There is hardly any difference in the education level of Sikhs in Punjab from the all India levels at 27.25% and 28.70% respectively. However, Punjab fares badly at the graduate and above levels at 4.96%, which is higher (6.94%) at

the all India level. At both the levels the “other literates,” including the assorted category of technical and nontechnical diploma holders are about 22% each. Those who have passed class VIII (middle) are similar, that is, 17% each.

The all India data show that the males and females are almost equal at all levels except at the primary and matric/higher secondary levels where they score 5% more than the males at the former but 8% less at the latter level. It is an interesting coincidence that there is no difference in the Punjab figures at all levels of literacy except that females score about 4% lower than the males for matric/higher secondary. It may allude towards gender equality preached by Sikhism though patriarchy persists to a large extent in mundane social relations.

Sikhs Outside Punjab

The Sikhs are present in each state of India. One likely finds three types of Sikhs outside Punjab: Jatts/peasants, Khatri/traders, and locals. The partition of India (1947) witnessed huge migration of Sikhs especially traders from the far end of western Punjab. They spread all over the country and settled in the urban areas exploiting their business skills. They specialize in the wholesale and retail trade of commodities and are no less in skill than the Marwari/bania traders. The huge billboards of Bagga Wines, for instance, dotted Hyderabad in 2012. They also make successful industrial entrepreneurs.

The second stream of migration started in 1950s. Gosal notes, “The number of such migrants from Punjab to foreign lands and other States of India are estimated at 240,000 and 220,000 respectively” (1965: 119). The Jatt Sikhs moved out to Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan in search of land for agriculture. They were already moving out across the country as drivers of trucks and cabs in the metropolises. Not only Delhi but Kolkata and Mumbai had Sikhs in huge numbers, monopolizing the trade until some decades ago. They became owners of the transport companies and automobile spare parts business. The transport bazaar in Hyderabad is dominated by them. The Jatts and Khatri there are called Punjabi Sikhs distinct from the Dakhani Sikhs.

The “local Sikhs” are known by the state they inhabit, such as Dakhani (Hyderabad Deccan), Mysorean, Axomiya, Bihari, and Kashmiri Sikhs. Their physical features are characteristic of the region, different from the Punjabi Sikhs. It is worth noting that the first three types of “local Sikhs” whose ancestors reached there two centuries ago, trace their origin to Punjab. The Dakhani Sikhs claim to be the progeny of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s army dispatched there at the Nizam’s request. They formed the irregular forces under Nazim-i-Jami’at-i-Sikhan. They are scattered over all the districts of the erstwhile Deccan state now trifurcated into Telengana, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. Their largest concentration is in Hyderabad metropolis and Nanded. They are urban dwellers engaged in petty business and low cadre jobs.

The Axomiya Sikhs settled in the villages of Nagaon district (Assam) too claim that their ancestors in the Maharaja’s army were sent there in 1820 to support the Ahom king. The Sikh commander was killed, and the surviving soldiers eventually settled in the villages of Chaparmukh and Barkola. They are agriculturalists primarily still (Singh 2018).

The Mysorean Sikhs claim their ancestors were soldiers brought from Punjab two centuries ago by Tipu Sultan’s father. Dewan Singh writes, “In recognition of their services, the Sikh contingents were thus granted seven villages by way of jagir (fief) out of which there still exist three villages at a distance of about 50 miles from Srirangapatna” (1972: 29).

The Bihari Sikhs make no claims to martial ancestry though they believe that their ancestors accompanied Guru Tegh Bahadur from Punjab. A significant majority has converted to Sikhism from the days of Baba Nanak, hence called Nanakpanthis. Numerous Khatri traders from Punjab

had established their business in jute, spices, silk, and cotton. Most Sikhs who later settled at trading centers, notably Malda, Kolkata, Dacca on the river route remember how their ancestors living in Kantnagar and Bhawanipur (north Bihar) were engaged in trade. They used to travel to these places in hundreds of boats. A special boat carrying *Guru Granth Sahib* always led the fleet. They also transported goods by land route in bullock carts. They had own ports and godowns at various points to anchor boats, boatmen, and park bullock carts. They made good fortune during the British rule and bought vast tracts of land. Gradually, they became rich and influential landlords holding estates of Bhawanipur, Uchhla, and Laxmipur. Shivanagar in Vaishali has about 300 Sikhs for the last ten generations whose ancestors too came from Punjab (Gill 2017).

The Agrahari Sikhs in Bihar and other eastern states, including Kolkata, are both *sahajdhari* and Khalsa Sikhs. The former are called Muniaras and the latter Singh Agraharis, supporting all the five Ks. The latter consider themselves superior to the former though they do take their daughters in marriage. In Kashmir the Sikh population at the end of the Afghan rule was 4,000 that rose to 10,000 in 1891 (Sarna:1993). At the time of partition (1947) there were 75,000 Sikhs whose number rose to 2,34,848 in 2011. They are distributed equally in the rural and urban areas.

The tribal Sikhs – Sikligars and Banjaras – are distributed all over the country except in the northeastern states. The former in Deccan believe that their ancestors from Rajasthan traveled with Guru Gobind Singh to Nanded. Some accompanied the Guru from Punjab as well. The Banjaras are known as Lambada, Lamani, Guar Banjara, Vanzara in different regions. Their ancestors were traders carrying merchandise and weapons on bullock carts. There are numerous prominent Sikhs amongst them most notably Makhan Shah Labana and Lakhi Shah Banjara. The socioeconomic conditions of these people are quite dismal.

The Mazhabi Sikhs in Shillong and Guwahati residing there for more than a century are called Punjabi Sikhs, as is their residential colony. Unlike “local Sikhs” elsewhere, they have not adopted the local culture except mastering the Khasi and Axomiya languages. They belong to two districts in Punjab – Amritsar and Gurdaspur – keeping intact their Majhaili dialect. They do not marry the local people.

The following five issues are significant to the “local Sikhs.”

I Oral History of Arrival

The issue of oral history of arrival at the place of their residence is crucial to them. Two sizeable communities – Dakhani and Axomiya Sikhs – mention with pride that their ancestors arrived in the Deccan and in Assam in 1832 and 1820 respectively. They intend to connect with Punjab, the birthplace of Sikhs. It is like being authentic. This issue does not bother the Punjabi Sikhs who may be there for three or four generations since they have organic links with Punjab.

II The Sikh Form

The question of religion is significant to the “local Sikhs,” including the Mazhabi Sikhs of north-east. It helps in the construction of their self and identity. The Sikh men’s markers –uncut beard and turban – are manifestly visible. They married the local women after administering them *amrit*. These women wear the local sari though their daughters prefer Punjabi dress (*salwar-kameez*) while going to a gurdwara.

The “local Sikhs” are particular about their Sikh look, having a beard more often flowing and a turban or *keski* (short cloth piece) to cover the head. The Dakhani Sikhs call it *siropa* and the Axomiya and Bihari Sikhs *gamochha*. The “local Sikh” youth are also particular about it. A Sikh traveler from Punjab finds it amazing: “We don’t find such Sikhs in Punjab even” (Singh 2018). B.K. Medhi

(1989) reports much ruckus in Barkola (Assam) when two Sikh boys trimmed their beard. A fine was slapped on a newly married Sikh couple moving bareheaded in a gurdwara.

The Bihari Sikhs too are no less than others in this respect. J.S. Gill writes, “These Sikhs are seen in colourful turbans and supporting the essential Five Ks” (2017). All such Sikhs who used to wear *kurta* (long shirt) and pyjama with black turbans were called Akalis, while the senior generation supporting *kurta-dhoti* with white turbans were called Dukalis.

The Sikligar Sikhs are committed to religion. The president of Sikh Sikligar Samaj, Hyderabad, claims that they do not allow shaving of hair in case of head injury even, stitching or no stitching (Singh 2018). The Banjara Sikhs as gurdwara functionaries keep the Sikh form complete. In 2012, four out of seven *kirtani jathas* (hymn singing bands) at Takht Hazoor Sahib were theirs. The only exception to the Sikh form are Mazhabis of the northeast. Their senior generation kept hair and turban with *kada* (steel bracelet) though the middle one removed the turban, which is reappearing in the younger generation.

The “local Sikhs” believe they are not “duplicate” but *pakke* (cent percent) Sikh. They claim, “*Hamney sikhi ko sambhala hai, Punjab mein to bura haal hai.*” (“We have conserved the Sikh religion (form) that is ruined in Punjab.”) They are particular about visible Sikh symbols including kirpan that establishes their identity as a Khalsa Sikh. They have no problem in believing and practicing Sikhism post 1984 (Singh 2018). Ravinder Kaur notes about the Jat/Jatt Sikhs of Punjab: “Most Sikhs wear at least two of these overt symbols – the turban signifying uncut hair and *kara* or the steel bracelet. Most non-Sikhs identify Sikhs by these symbols” (1986: 222).

III The Sikh Identity

There is an overlap between the Sikh form and identity, and the Sikh symbols are ideally common to both. A dialectic between the social and religious identity historically provides the community a self-sustaining force for constructing and reinforcing self-identity. The social history of a community reinforces the history of its members’ religion and vice versa. The historical aspect of social identity here refers to images, the “local Sikhs” carry with them. The Axomiya and Dakhani Sikhs take pride in being the progeny of Sikh soldiers of Ranjit Singh’s army. The bravery of the Sikh soldiers who fought for the Ahom king has become a part of the folklore and the mainstream literature in Assam. These Sikhs took active part in the Assam movement “for the sons of the soil.” The Dakhani Sikhs feel proud that their ancestors neutralized the notorious bands of Arabs and Rohillas in Hyderabad Deccan and blew away the Nizam’s offer of *jagir* (fief) at Nirmal. Many of them rebelled against him (Singh 2018). Their sons had ensured employment in the Nizam’s forces. K.S. Singh notes, “The community’s self-perception at the regional level is high” (2003: 475).

The “local Sikhs” take pride in their religious identity displaying the Sikh insignia (Nishan Sahib) on their houses or the main gates. Their vehicles, personal or commercial, invariably carry it. The Sikh identity to them is more important than the caste and clan identity. They never write gotra on their name plates, visiting cards, or vehicles. They are aware of different castes for administrative purposes but never invoke these for marital alliance. They insist on being *amritdhari*. Some resent their identification as Dakhani, Axomiya, or Bihari given them by the Punjabi Sikhs who also call them “duplicate.” The Agrahari Sikhs in Kolkata too are called “nakli” Sikhs (Islam 2012).

The Sikh identity instills sense of security and safety to their neighbors and passengers in their vehicles/cabs across the country. A Dakhni Sikh’s paying guest accommodation is preferred by a local’s daughter. Despite poverty, says a young man, they have maintained the Sikhs’ prestige and domineering effect as ever: “*Singhan da dabdba poora hai ji*” (Singh 2018). They have become conscious of their regional identity. They want to retain and sustain it, including their institutions’

particularly Takht Hazoor Sahib. The issue of being outsiders afflicts the Sikhs in Meghalaya only. The Khasis want them “to go home.”

The collective participation of all Sikhs – local and Punjabi – in religious celebrations, on a large scale with greater intensity is now a regular feature. Their high-spirited enthusiasm and martial demeanors in *nagar kirtan jaloos* (city religious procession) virtually scare the local residents. Following *gurtagaddi* celebrations (2008) certain families left Nanded out of fear (Singh 2018). The Dakhani Sikhs narrate proudly that when no one was allowed to take out procession on President Clinton’s visit to Hyderabad in 2000, they protested against the Sikh killings in Kashmir.

The “local Sikhs” practice boundary maintenance à la Barth (1969) both spatially and socially, marrying within Sikhs and bringing the outsiders into their fold. The Axomiya Sikhs confine mate selection within one district (Nagaon), while the Dakhani Sikhs remain within the erstwhile Deccan. The Bihari Sikhs have a wider range, from Patna to the northeast. The Mazhabi Sikhs restrict themselves to Shillong/Guwahati or Amritsar/Gurdaspur. The Sikligar and Banjara Sikhs practice strictly tribal endogamy.

IV Issue of Punjabi Language

The problem of language is serious. The “local Sikhs” neither speak nor understand Punjabi. They speak the local language in regional dialect fluently and impeccably. Even if they know Hindi, which majority Axomiya Sikhs do not, they feel comfortable in their own language. The Punjabi Sikhs wonder, “What kind of Sikhs are they, who do not know/understand Punjabi!” hence, called “duplicate” Sikhs. Also, because they celebrate local festivals like Bihu (Assam); chhat puja (Bihar); janmashthami and worship of Laxmi, Ganesh (Deccan), and Kali (Kolkata). Himadri Banerjee writes, “Their dual self also underlines that they ‘enjoy doing Bihu not bhangra (Punjab men’s folk dance)’” (2006: 107). Medhi too mentions, “Elements from both Sikhism and indigenous folk tradition co-exist in the social life of the Assamese Sikhs” (2013: 389).

The “local Sikhs” feel belittled on this count. They try to teach their children skills in Punjabi language (Gurmukhi). The local gurdwara provides the space and necessary infrastructure. They request the SGPC and rich Punjabi Sikhs around for necessary help. There are attempts in transliterating essential *banis* in Telgu and Axomiya languages. Singh (2018) informs that the “local Sikhs” now react against such labelling: “*Hamey to Punjabi nahin aati, woh to Sikh hi nahin lagte.*” (“We do not know Punjabi, but they (Punjabi Sikhs) do not look like Sikhs even.”)

V Looking Back to Punjab

The “local Sikhs” are indifferent to the idea of looking back to Punjab. No doubt, there is an element of reverence in the very idea of Punjab though not as a geographic entity but as a religious space harboring the most sacred Golden Temple, or *Swarna Mandir*, as they say. They always look forward to pay respects there. One recites in *ardas* each time – Sri Amritsar Sahib *de darshan-ishman*. The Dakhani Sikhs availed chance twice of sponsored trips to Amritsar, once on *gurtagaddi* celebrations in 2008 and again in 2019 on Guru Nanak’s 550th birth anniversary. The Axomiya Sikhs were not that lucky. The SGPC sponsored once a contingent of 186 persons to Punjab in March 2008.

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SIKHS IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Harpreet Singh

Introduction

The Sikh communities in Australia and New Zealand have had an interlinked path to their establishment, growth, and development since the first phases of colonization in the nineteenth century. The communities existed in a web of connections spreading across the British Empire and the globe. From India across South East Asia, the Pacific Islands and North America, Sikhs established networks and settled permanently and advocated for their citizenship wherever they went. The migration to Australia and New Zealand was a gradual process defined by prevailing attitudes, immigration legislation, and the tenacity of a community suffering from racial prejudice. The global institutions and ways of life were not entirely foreign for the Sikhs. They were familiar with British rule in India, and the institutions that existed there were similar in New Zealand and Australia. The standardization of colonial institutions meant Sikhs could adapt quickly and engage the society rapidly as they migrated. The path was often rocky, but when the opportunities presented themselves to the Sikhs, they took full advantage of each country. The community faced with challenges has prospered, remaining distinct yet highly integrated within their local society, recognizing their rights as citizens wherever they have settled.

Early Indians

The initial contacts between Australia and India were due to the connection with British ruled India and the support it provided to the development of Australia. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ships across the Pacific were operated by Indian sailors, also known as lascars. Many of these ships traversed to Australia, where lascars would voluntarily and involuntarily remain in Australia. The ships were lifelines for Australia, bringing with them resources such as cattle, tools, and food so settlers could develop the complex, hot, and arid landscape that makes up most of the continent. India was central to the British during their expansion into the Pacific and South East Asia. Lascars were hired on many of the ships going to Australia as they often provided cheaper labor when compared to their British counterparts. Lascars were located all over the globe, and their presence in Australia was recorded at the earliest periods of colonization in Australia and New Zealand.

Australia also became an important center to expand into New Zealand and other Pacific Island nations (Singh 2016; Otago Witness 1887: 18).

The early nineteenth-century records showed the contacts made with Australia were Indian sailors and Indian indentured labor brought in to work on farming lands. In 1805 a lascar was taken to hospital in Sydney after having “his leg broken stowing government timber on board [a] vessel” (Lascar Injured Sent to Hospital in Sydney, 1805: 4). In 1808 another lascar was murdered by Jeremiah Horsley again in Sydney (The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 1808: 2). The religious affiliations of many lascars were also apparent, many of them being Muslims (The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 1825: 3). The indentured labor brought in Australia was to lower the costs of labor for those running for-profit operations. The use of indentured labor was controversial in Australia as many felt it was a direct attack on colonial workers’ wages and working conditions who demanded more pay and better conditions to do the same work. The threat posed by indentured labor meant hostility towards South Asians flared from locals. The laborers were recorded interacting with colonial institutions and early settlers and facing problems within the colony. Some of these early indentured laborers went on to integrate and become prominent members of Australian society. They married local English women and ultimately became Australians in their own right.

The initial contacts were far fewer in New Zealand than Australia, but South Asian connections were made similar to the British colonization of the island. The first known records of Indians landing in New Zealand date back to the 1810s. The first arrivals consisted of Indian sailors who had absconded from their vessel and landed at South Island (Ballantyne 2012: 105–121). Another source from around the same time referred to a group of Indian sailors set adrift after disease broke out aboard their whaling ship (The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 1816: 2). These Indians ended up on the North Island of New Zealand. The presence of an Indian was also noted on a small island below the South Island. He was recorded as a descendant of an Indian sailor who was shipwrecked in the late 1700s (Otago Witness 1882: 9).

As the number of colonialists increased, more Indians were recorded throughout New Zealand. The first significant presence of Indians in New Zealand came in the mid-1800s. They came as servants of officials (New South Wales Government. Inward Passenger Lists 1854) in the Indian Civil Service, sailors (Otago Daily Times 1864: 5), gold prospectors (Otago Witness 1859: 3), traders (Taranaki Herald 1888: 2), and doctors (Waikato Times 1876: 2). Much like the Australian situation, the vast majority of Indians came into New Zealand of their own free will, but some landed in New Zealand involuntarily. These included lascars who deserted ships due to abuse, low pay, and poor conditions. The early Indian arrival came in a volatile context. The British Empire was in direct conflict with the indigenous Maori, a gold mining boom that eventually declined and led to economic depression and a population that was becoming increasingly hostile to those they deemed outsiders. As a result, Indians became easy targets for locals. Many chose to wear traditional clothing and head covering, had difficulty communicating in English, and relied on others, including interpreters, in situations such as court proceedings. Foreigners were often targeted with derogatory terms through local newspapers, though the reactions were often mixed. Some were openly hostile, while others were confused by the culture and customs they brought with them. One such example was a Muslim who went to court in 1892 wearing a taqiyah (an Islamic headdress) (West Coast Times 1883: 5). It was forcibly removed from him as it was deemed disrespectful in the New Zealand context. An explanation in another newspaper stated that in the Indian context, the covering of the head was seen as a sign of respect (Bruce Herald 1892: 2). Similarities can be drawn in the Australian experience but at a later time and slower pace.

Early Sikhs

Much like the history of colonization, the arrival of Sikhs in Australia predated New Zealand. The earliest known arrival into Australia were cameleers who were brought in with other Indian and Middle Easterners. The cameleers were established to connect inland Australia with the coasts. Inland Australia was a dry, hot, and arid area where it was difficult for horses to enter and survive. Camels were more suited for the environment and were introduced in the 1860s Golden Age (Queanbeyan NSW : 1860–1864) 1862: 4). The success of camels meant people were needed to train and maintain the herd, which eventually provided a backbone of transport between inland farms and coastal townships. Sikhs, amongst numerous other groups, were brought in to provide this service during the 1860s (Jones and Kenny 2010: 166).

Records of Sikhs between the 1860s and 1880s remain sparse. Some Sikhs were likely entering the colony during this period, and their histories have not been discovered. By the 1880s, Sikhs were noted living and working in Australia. Brief records from the court system show Sikhs engaging the justice system for thefts (Brisbane Courier (Qld. : 1864–1933 1880: 2). Sikhs also applied for permits to undertake cremations, giving us brief glimpses of a community hidden to public records.

By the 1890s, Sikhs were noted across Australia. Their occupations included mining (The West Australian 1898: 3), hawking, laboring, landownership, storekeeping (The Herald 1894: 4), and entertainment (*Sportsman* (Melbourne (Vic. : 1882–1904) 1898: 2). Extensive records exist, including the names of those applying for the most prominent occupation, hawking. Sikhs regularly applied and approved licenses to trade across various states (Hamilton Spectator (Vic. : 1870–1918) 1891: 4). Individuals such as Heerat Singh, Catter Singh, Geilab Singh, and Puttee Singh were all mentioned in a single batch of hawking licenses in the township of Hamilton, Victoria (Hamilton Spectator (Vic. : 1870–1918) 1891: 4).

The arrival of Sikhs in New Zealand came after Australia. Following the chronology of colonization, New Zealand came after Australia, and Sikhs followed the same path. The initial Sikh movements into New Zealand during the nineteenth century were likely due to Australia's increasing hostility. By the late nineteenth century, the anti-Asian sentiment was running high, and the political attitudes at state and federal levels were firmly set against Asians. In addition, Australia was promoting pro-white policies, which made it difficult for Sikhs and Indians to travel and migrate to Australia. Sikhs then set sights on other countries with more relaxed entry requirements. New Zealand became this avenue for many Sikhs, who often came through Asia or Pacific Islands nations such as Fiji.

The first recorded Sikh in New Zealand was in 1888 in the South Island city of Dunedin. (Otago Daily Times 1888: 3). The sudden appearance was unlikely as he was recorded selling candy without a license. Oral histories also noted that Sikhs were working on the railway in the same area in the 1880s, but scholars previously dismissed the likelihood. Records also note other Sikhs arriving via Australia in the 1880s, and during the 1890s, multiple shipping manifests and records show Sikhs spread across New Zealand. The migration was not unique to New Zealand but rather a strand in a more extensive web of migratory activity spanning the globe. Southeast Asia, North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, and many other locations were all hot spots to immigrate for Sikhs. Some destinations were sought after more than others, such as North America, but immigration policies defined where many Sikhs ended up.

When Sikhs ended up in New Zealand, their patterns of activities and behavior were similar to their counterparts in Australia. Occupations included mining, laboring, candy makers, hawking, business owners, herbal doctors, amongst a myriad of other professions (Singh 2016: 164). By far, the dominant profession was hawking, where Sikhs would purchase a horse and cart and sell wares by traveling through communities – these included products such as clothing, jewelry, food, and

many other products. The money earned by many of these men supplemented incomes in India, where many had families relying on funds to continue farming and land acquisition. Many sought to protect themselves economically, while others sought financial advancement. Owning a brick house in the village, installing glass windows, and owning top-notch farming equipment meant there was a competitive element to making a living overseas. The community in both Australia and New Zealand during this early period are often hidden from history. However, the chronology of activities suggests a community with a more in-depth and older history than currently noted by scholars.

Religious and Cultural Reproduction

Sikhs in Australia and New Zealand expressed and continued to practice their culture and religion the best they could for the circumstances. Being so far away from home, with so few community members and a lack of resources, meant reproducing faith and culture was challenging. Nevertheless, public records depict instances of cultural reproduction, including cremations and weddings. In both New Zealand and Australia, Sikhs continued funeral practices such as cremations.

In the cremation of a Sikh woman in Taumaranui, New Zealand, the description elaborates how there was no “garanthi” (Evening Post 1933: 8) to light the pyre, so it “was lighted by the husband” (Evening Post 1933: 8). A prayer was recited and interpreted by a reporter as “God forgive the sins of the deceased and take her to the place the Indians called ‘Surgh’ (Heaven)” (Evening Post 1933: 8). In Australia, similar processes were followed by the Sikh community there. Near the Canning River in Western Australia, Sikhs “with beards and turbans stood by the fire” (Mirror (Perth WA : 1921–1956) 1934: 8). The body was described as being “wrapped in a sheet” and placed on logs with kerosene sprinkled on top to intensify the fire. When asked if the ashes would be sent back to India to be placed in the Ganges, the Sikhs replied, “The Canning River fills the bill equally” (Mirror (Perth WA : 1921–1956) 1934: 8). There are multiple instances of cremation occurring throughout Australia and New Zealand in much the same manner through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Weddings were also an essential factor in expressing faith. One of the most elaborate and well-documented weddings was in Tē Aroha, New Zealand. “Miss Kartari Singh of Tē Aroha married Mr Surain Singh lately arrived from India.” The wedding included a “Granthie” and a Guru Granth especially acquired for the occasion. The bride followed the traditional manner of marriage, veiling her face, and the marriage took place with a recitation of the “sacred writings” (Auckland Star 1932: 8). The marching band and procession of 20 cars were also included during the passage through the main township. The father was wearing a turban along with the groom. These historical instances show the community was not shy in expressing its identity, and photos from the period also reinforce this (Singh 2016: 201).

The Sikh sacred text, the *Guru Granth*, also had a place in early Sikh migrations in Australia and New Zealand. In Australia, the first *Guru Granth* arrived in the 1880s. Phuman Singh, who settled in New Zealand, brought one of the earliest copies when he landed in Australia while traveling. Phuman migrated to New Zealand in 1892 (Singh 2016: 197). Another was noted in 1895 during the cremation of Charam Singh in Melbourne, Victoria. Charam Singh was to be cremated, and Mett Singh organized the ceremony. Part of the ceremony was described at the home of Mett Singh, who had a *Guru Granth Sahib* in a room. He described that it would be read aloud “cover to cover – a task which generally took a fortnight.” During the reading, “friends of the dead man give what they can in charity to assist the spirit.” The description was one of the first descriptions of an Sahaj Paath outside of India and placed the sacred text in Australia in the nineteenth century. In New Zealand, Phuman Singh had also installed the *Guru Granth* in his house, where it was kept in a separate room with the Bible, as Phuman was married to an English woman. Here the daughter of Phuman described how Sikh travelers would stop by and congregate on weekends to hold services.

Religion was an essential facet of the early Sikh experience, and many tried to carry on cultural traditions even when thousands of miles away from their homeland.

Politics

The Sikh communities in both Australia and New Zealand were politically active. Their citizenship of each respective country was expressed in multiple ways. The first was through engagement with core institutions such as the justice system. It was also expressed through engagement with the media and political leaders. Sikhs elaborated their opinions and positions within New Zealand and Australia as well as the Empire. The pattern of political engagement was consistent with activities across the world. From Dr. Isher Singh's letter to the House of Representatives in the United States to the Komagata Maru incident, Sikhs did not fear to fight for their rights in the farthest reaches of the globe.

The growth of political organizing and activism came with the growth in anti-Asian sentiment across anglophile countries. Australia and New Zealand, along with Canada, the United States, and other countries, were proactively legislating to keep their respective countries white. They saw Chinese, Japanese, and Indians as a threat to their way of life socially and economically. The growing impetus to legislate against Sikhs caused them to react.

The situation in Australia was acute as concerns of "racial purity" (West Australian Sunday Times (Perth WA : 1897–1902) 1898: 4) ran through the media. It proved difficult for the Australian government to legislate against Sikhs who were British subjects. Instead, the government implemented language tests that would prove difficult for Sikhs to complete. The unfair application of these tests using any European language meant Sikhs were prevented from entering Australia and avoided any conflict with London. The introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 ushered in restrictive immigration requirements for over half a century.

In Australia, political activism began in the 1890s, when Sikhs were experiencing difficulties entering and leaving Australia. Ralla Singh in Perth, Western Australia, expressed his views on the treatment of Sikhs on May 4, 1898. In attacking the Premiere in regards to getting rights to mines, he stated, "What we Sikhs, complain of, is the violation by an unjust and prejudiced Government of our birth rights as born British subjects, as most of us are" (The West Australian 1898: 3). He went on to say, "Though our own rights are being trampled down on should the occasion arise, we will fight to the last to crush the enemies of the Queen" (The West Australian 1898: 3). He also went on to describe the legislature of Western Australia as "traitors to their own country," and if their patriotism was put to the test, they would not be at the frontline "but instead seeking refuge in some corner of the nearest pub" (The West Australian 1898: 3).

The influence on New Zealand from Australia was also profound. New Zealand followed a similar trajectory to Australia by introducing a similar language testing regime to prevent the entry of Asians. In addition, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 essentially halted immigration from India to New Zealand, bar a few exceptions. The legislation remained in force until the 1980s.

In New Zealand, the Sikh community was also politically active. Much like Australia, New Zealand was also challenged by the issues of race and pro-white policies. The Sikh community responded accordingly. Indar Randhawa, a prominent Sikh leader, when responding to an article from the White New Zealand League, quoted Queen Victoria stating,

There shall not be in the eye of the law any distinction or disqualification whatever founded on the mere distinction of colours, origin, language or creed, but the protection of the law in letter or substance shall be extended impartially to all alike.

(Auckland Star 1926: 15)

He also attacked the organization for “loosening” (Auckland Star 1926: 15) goodwill within the empire instead of strengthening it.

The Sikhs in New Zealand went further to organize an association to curb the ongoing threats. The Indian community was represented by Gujarati and Punjabi (primarily Sikh) groups spread throughout the North Island. The Gujarati community controlled two organizations in Auckland and Wellington, while a third called the Indian Association Country Section was made up of Sikhs. Finally, the three organizations were merged into the Central Indian Association. The unification formed a unified front in dealing with issues relating to the Indian community (Singh 2016: 137–187).

Immigration Restrictions

The 1901 Immigration Restriction Act brought into law the White Australia Policy. The policy established the precedent that Australia was to maintain an ethnically homogenous society, blocking the entry of non-white people into Australia. The law did this by implementing various policies to keep non-whites out. One method was a dictation test, which required immigrants to recite passages in any European language chosen by the immigration officer. The test proved helpful as the discretion of language chosen was with the officer at the border. The government also blocked ships from bringing non-whites to Australia who were seeking to migrate. If a ship did so, they were fined, causing shipping companies to prevent non-whites from traveling to Australia. The multi-pronged approach had a profound effect on non-white migration into the country. The law was strongly enforced until the end of World War II, and the policy was officially in effect until 1973.

From the end of World War II, the Australian government began to loosen its restriction as shortages were apparent within various labor markets. Initially, the government focused on refugees and displaced, but industrialized higher-skilled labor was required like the country. By 1967 it was clear that a skills-based model of immigration was required. The need to support manufacturing and production meant that by 1973 the White Australia Policy was abolished.

In New Zealand, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1923 had a similar effect. The implementation of the legislation effectively halted Asian immigration into New Zealand and stifled growth for the Sikh community. New Zealand modelled its policies on Australia and emphasized racial purity throughout its implementation. The Department of the Exterior emphasized the racial element of the policy, stating,

Our immigration is based firmly on the principle that we are and intend to remain a country of European development. It is inevitably discriminatory against Asians – indeed against all persons who are not wholly of European race and colour. Whereas we have done much to encourage immigration from Europe, we do everything to discourage it from Asia.

(Greif 1995: 39)

The policy was also ended in theory in the 1970s, but white immigration continued to be preferred. It was not until 1987 when the policy was officially abolished (Singh 2016, 137).

The restrictive immigration policies impacted the growth of the Sikhs. Small communities managed to establish themselves and slowly grow in both countries based on pre-legislative migration. They embedded themselves in agriculture, where they strengthened economically. Sikh communities formed in areas such as Woolgoolga, Australia, and Hamilton, New Zealand. Many grew bananas and other fruits in Australia, while in New Zealand, dairy farming was dominant. The restrictive growth meant no significant changes took place in the Sikh community until the 1970s,

when immigration policies began to change. For Australia, it was quicker, but it took until the late 1980s before New Zealand opened up its border to Asian immigration.

The New Phase Population

From the 1970s onward, Australia began accepting immigrants from all over the world. No longer focusing on race, Australia sought to find specific skills to fill its industries. The change was profound for the country. In 1941 Australia only had approximately 2,100 Indians, and by 1981 after the lifting of restrictions, this increased to 41,657. It must be noted that the population of the Sikh community was fragmented and hidden by other identifiers such as “Hindoo” or other nationalities, making it difficult to discern an exact number. The new types of migrants were not laborers. These were highly educated professionals entering the industry to bolster the knowledge and skills base of the economy. The first records of a Sikh population in Australia were noted in the 1996 census. The number was noted at 12,000. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the population had reached 71,000. By 2016 it had reached 125,900, representing one of the fastest-growing religions in the country.

In New Zealand, the next phase of migration began in 1987. Numbers for New Zealand also remain highly fragmented due to the small numbers involved. From the records available, the Sikhs population was approximately 1,000. By the end of 1986, four years after the end of restrictive legislation in 1991, it had doubled. No precise data metrics on the Sikh community were available until 2001, when the population was captured in the census. According to the census, the Sikh population was 5,196 in 2001. The population had almost doubled by 2006 to 9,507. By 2013 the population had more than doubled to 19,191. The latest 2018 census records the population at 40,908, a further doubling of the population.

Twenty-first-Century Employment

Since they arrived in Australia, Sikhs have been employed in multiple areas of the economy. Self-employment played a pivotal role during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the twenty-first century, Sikhs were spread across various professional, labor, and support jobs. The industrialization of Australia and the pivot away from agriculture meant Australia needed higher-skilled labor. In addition, the shift in immigration policy and the focus on skills as opposed to race attracted Sikhs from all walks of life into the country. From scientists, healthcare professionals, to manufacturing and telecommunications, the changes in Australia’s economy directly impacted the types of individuals migrating into the country.

Sikhs concentrated into three areas of the economy – transport, postal, and warehousing (17.7%); accommodation and food services (13.1%); and health care and social services (10.6%). The community also significantly concentrated in retail, manufacturing, and administration. The highest concentration of professions was as machinery operators and drivers (19.6%), laborers (19%), and professionals (12.5%). There is also a significant presence of Sikhs working as technicians and trade workers and community and personal service workers. The unemployment within the community sat in line with the national average of 5.7%.

Income levels within the Sikh community varied significantly. The majority of Sikhs (above 15 years old) earned up to \$799 per week (56.1%), and about 24% of the population earned between \$800 and \$1,500 per week. Though a significant portion of the population also had nil or negative income (16.1%), the unemployment remained stable in line with the rest of Australia. One of the primary reasons for low wages was the significant numbers of Sikhs in the country as

international students. Visa restriction on students meant their hours of work were strictly limited, and there they could not earn much while in Australia.

For Sikhs, education has been an essential part of life in Australia. By the 2000s, there were an increasing number of Sikhs studying at Australian tertiary institutions from overseas, which significantly impacted the number of Sikhs having a tertiary level education. According to government statistics, 65.5% of Sikhs over the age of 15 had a tertiary level qualification, which encompassed bachelor's degrees, advanced diplomas, and certifications. Those who had an educational level up to Year 12 (high school level) made up approximately 28.7% of the Sikh population, again over 15 years old. Sikh involvement in education has expanded significantly to include professors, researchers in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions across Australia. Sikhs had also begun investing in their community by establishing a Sikhs Grammar School in Sydney. The purpose of the school was to cater to the local Sikh community and support Sikh culture, language, and religion in Australia.

Sikhs have also helped in the growth of the Punjabi language in Australia. According to the government statistics, 81% of Punjabi speakers are Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus. The growth in the Sikh population has also meant that the increase in those speaking Punjabi was 200% between 2006 and 2011. The increase has been so dramatic that Punjabi is ranked the thirteenth most spoken language in Australia.

Much like their Australian counterparts, New Zealand Sikhs also experienced significant economic success during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The increasing population and rapidly growing community saw Sikhs entering many areas of the jobs market. In addition to owning businesses, Sikh men and women integrated themselves in most labor market sectors. They became mayors, ministers of parliament, and members of the military, police, and security services of New Zealand. According to the 2013 census, 24% of the male Sikh working population were involved in retail trade occupations, including business owners and people working in retail outlets as managers and team leaders. Sikh men also featured prominently in the professional and scientific sectors and health care and social assistance. On the other hand, the 2013 census revealed that Sikh women made up 33% of Sikhs working in the retail trade, while a significant number worked in health care and social assistance.

Current Activities

Sikhs institutions have spread across Australia at a rapid rate, in line with the growth of the population. Sikh gurdwaras in Australia are the centers of local communities across the continent. Currently, it is estimated that there are over 30 gurdwaras in Australia, with the highest concentration in New South Wales and Victoria. ("Gurdwaras in Australia | Resources | Sikh Youth Australia" n.d.) The first known gurdwara in Australia was built in 1968 in Woolgoolga, New South Wales, known as the Temple on the Hill (Bouma et al. 2009: 5). Gurdwaras are located in most of the larger cities across the country – including Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, and Cairns – with some cities (such as Sydney) having up to seven gurdwaras to cater for the local community.

Sikhs across Australia have also formed multiple organizations to support the community, both locally and nationally. Organizations such as the Australian Sikh Association ("Gurdwara Sahib Glenwood | Sikh Temple | Parklea Gurdwara | ASA Ltd" n.d.), Sikh Volunteers Australia ("Visit by Whozcookn and Wellsprings for Women | Sikh Volunteers Australia" n.d.), and Turbans and Trust ("What Is Turbans and Trust?" n.d.) have been providing outreach and assistance to the Sikh community. Their services include turban-tying sessions to teach people about the Sikh turban, joining local charity marathons, and attending local events such as lantern festivals. Sikhs also host local events such as the Australia Sikh Games ("Home" n.d.), which draws competitors worldwide

to compete in various sporting events. Organizing events within the community is not a new phenomenon as records show Sikhs engaging the broader community since the late nineteenth century – Sikhs came together in the 1890s to fight against racially based legislation undermining their rights across Australia by engaging colonial presses. New Zealand has also had a proliferation of gurdwaras across the country. It is estimated that over 20 gurdwaras have been established across New Zealand, with multiple gurdwaras located in major centers. However, the vast majority are located in the largest city, Auckland.

New Zealand Sikhs also partake in Indian festivals such as *divālī* and *holī* and hold processions in Auckland for *vaiśākhī*, which is considered to be the most important day of the Sikh calendar (Mann 2004: 46). Celebrations also include anniversaries of the Australia New Zealand Army Corps day in remembrance of the sacrifice of New Zealand soldiers in both world wars. Political engagement with the mainstream community frequently occurs as leaders, such as the prime minister, visit gurdwaras to give speeches. An example of political engagement occurred during the 2015 Cricket World Cup hosted by Australia and New Zealand when Sikhs were ejected from the stadium carrying the ceremonial sword (*kirpān*). Consequently, Sikhs issued a complaint with the Human Rights Commission and garnered a favorable response from Prime Minister John Key. Sikh women have also engaged in the political process and established organizations to integrate and support the broader South Asian community. Such organizations include the New Zealand Sikh Women's Association, which was formed in 2002 to offer South Asian women and children assistance, especially in domestic violence cases. Sikh women have worked in private industry and become mayors (e.g., Sukhi Kaur Turner, mayor of Dunedin), members of the police force and members of parliament.

Conclusion

The Sikh communities in both Australia and New Zealand continue to thrive in their distinct yet similar contexts. In Australia, the community continues to integrate and participate in all aspects of Australian life. The community has in the twenty-first century joined ANZAC parades in the country acknowledging the invasion of Gallipoli by Allied forces during World War I (Collins 800). Some Sikhs have entered television shows, such as Sukhjot Kaur Khalsa on *Australia's Got Talent*, who became internationally recognized for her rousing poem about racism (Blatchford 2016). However, Sikhs have also faced challenges in Australia with the flaring of racial tensions in 2010 after racially motivated attacks against international students, resulting in diplomatic tensions between India and Australia ("Only 23 of 152 Oz Attacks Racist Ministry Tells LS – Indian Express" n.d.). The Sikh community is also a vibrant part of New Zealand.

The community has integrated itself into all aspects of society – economically, politically, socially, and culturally – reflecting a highly adaptive and dynamic community much like the original settlers into the country. The community proactively contributes to the social well-being of all New Zealanders through charities and organizations. It annually celebrates traditional religious holidays, both their own and those of other religious communities. The Sikhs are still growing as new migrants continue to arrive due to favorable attitudes, laws, and thriving economic opportunities. New arrivals and the community are supported by an extensive network of religious institutions and organizations. Those Sikhs who are now intergenerational are also actively involved with the Sikh community. However, many face the difficulties of a dual identity of being a New Zealander and a Sikh. The dual identity may cause friction as cultural norms and requirements (surrounding marriage, caste, and race) clash, especially with parents. However, Sikhs, much like the earliest settlers, continue to integrate themselves further into New Zealand society and strive to become Kiwis and adapting their religious identities within the new context. On the whole, Australia and

New Zealand are permanent homes for many Sikhs as their presence expands across the continent. After almost 140 years of settlement across Australasia, the Sikhs are a small but vibrant part of their respective societies and remain intertwined with the history of each nation.

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12

SIKH LIFE IN CANADA

Michael Hawley

Introduction

Neither “Sikh” nor “Canada” is a natural category. Religions and nations are not reified entities that come into being fully formed and endure through time. They are the products of historical circumstances, maneuverings, and contingencies. Likewise, diaspora communities are best conceived as processes rather than as static objects (Kenny 2013). It should be no surprise then that the life-worlds of Sikhs in Canada have ranged from oppositional encounter to mutual co-production to interstitial indeterminateness. This chapter offers a model for interpreting Sikh diaspora in Canada and offers an account of the changing formations of Sikh life in the country.

Sikh life in Canada may be interpreted in the interplay of five spheres: liberalism, nativism, transnationalism, *Panjabiyat*, and Sikh subjectivities. The content of each of these categories is broad, and the categories themselves are not watertight. Canadian liberalism is expressed in state ideology, as multicultural policy, and in public institutions. “Nativism” attempts to capture the breadth of majoritarian (and often hegemonic) ideological assumptions, state policies and laws, and the range of public imaginaries of the “host” community. “Transnationalism” are the connections across not only national borders but between locales within nations, as well as linkages between different communities (Vertovec 2009). “Transnationalism” centers Sikh connections with Panjab, and more generally with India, as well as Sikh ties with other diasporic places and minoritarian communities within and beyond Canada. Panjabi cultural formations (*Panjabiyat*) are the broad and nonspecific accepted cultural norms, values, and conventions characteristic of Sikh Panjabi society. “Sikh subjectivities” gestures to the various Sikh modes of self-understanding *vis-a-vis* other Sikh individuals and groups. This captures the range of Sikh self-understandings in *amritdhari*, *keshdhari*, and *sahajdhari* forms, in “sectarian” affiliations (e.g., Namdhari, Akhand Kirtani Jatha (AKJ), Nanaksar, etc.), and in ideological expressions of sovereignty such as those of Khalistani, Marxist, or secular Sikhs.

At the intersections of these spheres are the spaces in which Sikh life in Canada is imagined and lived. This model frames a first-order logic for interpreting Sikh life-worlds across the range of temporal and spatial Canadian contexts. However, there are several “second order” factors that must also be recognized. Generation, gender, personal experiences and conditions, conditions of arrival, education, language, caste, economic status, location of settlement, etc. must also be considered for any robust account of Sikh diasporic life. While these second-order factors are important, they remain beyond the scope of the present chapter.



Arrival, the “Nation,” and Connections (1888–1947)

Sikhs have been in Canada since the late nineteenth century. The first documented person of Sikh heritage in Canada was Prince Victor Jay Dhuleep Singh, son of Maharaja Dhuleep Singh and grandson of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Victor Jay Dhuleep Singh was stationed in Halifax in 1888–1889 as member of the staff of General Sir John Ross. Singh and Ross made a return, cross-Canada journey on the newly constructed Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), making their way to Victoria, British Columbia, in November and December 1888. Shortly thereafter, small numbers of Sikhs began to make their way to Canada from the United States in the 1890s. More well-documented is the contingent of Sikhs who returned via Canada from Queen Victoria’s Jubilee celebrations in 1897. Among them was perhaps the earliest Sikh settler on British Columbia’s west coast (Retired Major Kesur Singh).

Sikhs began to arrive on British Columbia’s west coast in larger numbers in the early twentieth century. The earliest arrivals were overwhelmingly single men with army backgrounds. They were soon joined by other ex-soldiers from Panjab as well as from British outposts along the Pacific Rim, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. In a few cases, wives too made the journey. These early arrivals commonly found work in sawmills. But they also found work in lumber camps, the railroads, construction, and transportation industries (Basran and Bolaria 2003: 96). Some of these migrants returned regularly to Panjab, while others settled permanently.

Diaspora communities are disruptive to national imaginaries of homogeneity. Kalra et al. (2005) have shown national narratives are premised on the notion of an imagined homogeneity, be it ethno-cultural, religious, linguistic, or racial. Canada’s national imaginary was (and continues to be) rooted in the myth of racial (and religious) homogeneity. Canadians envisioned Canada as “white” and commensurately as Anglo-Saxon Protestant Christian. That Canada should remain a “white nation” was a public and mainstream view: every Canadian Prime Minister whose image appears on contemporary Canadian currency openly advocated for a “White Canada” policy, and the most popular barroom ballad in Victoria BC in 1914 was “White Canada Forever” (Continuous Journey 2004). However, “East Indian” migration at the turn of the twentieth century not only challenged this narrative but that of the rhetoric that all British subjects were equal within the empire.

Sikhs were frequently denigrated as well as occasionally praised in the early 1900s. On the one hand, nativist anxiety over Asian immigration was framed in highly racialized terms. Nativists expressed “concern” about East Indians’ ability to assimilate to Canadian (i.e., “white”) culture, and they voiced angst about East Indians “flooding” the labor market. These concerns paled to nativist

fears about the moral turpitude of inviting miscegenation and homosexuality (Ali Kazimi 2004). For those who sought to reside in Canada, many were compelled to abandon their outward forms – uncut hair, turban, and *kirpan* – in order to conform to Canadian expectations and to secure employment, but also in the hope of shielding themselves from ubiquitous public hostility.

At the same time, the Sikh external form was valorized in the press. In several cases, Sikhs were lauded for their loyalty and martial service to the empire. For example, an Alberta newspaper reported on the “splendid example of the spirit of loyalty and devotion displayed by . . . an ex-sepoy of a well-known Sikh regiment” who, upon hearing of one of his own wounded officers, “requested that he should be sent out immediately . . . to take his share in the fighting for the King Emperor” (*Bassano Mail* 1915). Though clearly undesirable on racial, economic, and social grounds, Sikhs were unequivocally praised for their bravery and loyalty. This contradiction can only be understood in the logic of race and imperialism. Nativists imagined Sikhs in a way that would support *both* the project of white nation-building by their exclusion and the project of British imperialism by their inclusion. In short, Sikhs were good for the empire but not for the nation.

The rapid influx of “East Indians,” mostly Sikhs, to Vancouver in 1907 and 1908 resulted in nativist resistance at the federal, provincial, and populist levels. Racial consternation turned to outright hostility in 1907 when anti-Asian riots in Bellingham, Washington, spilled over into Vancouver, accompanied by assertive public calls for a “White Canada.” The British Columbia provincial and the Canadian federal government undertook several legislative interventions to curtail the “Hindu Invasion.” At the provincial level, “Orientals” could not own property, enter certain professions, attend school, or start businesses, and must possess \$200 upon entry into Canada (Basran and Bolaria 2003: 98). More informally, it was not unheard of for Canadian immigration officials to “forget” to issue departing Indian residents the proper documents they required to reenter Canada.

The federal government took a twofold approach to the issue of Indian immigration. The first was a far-fetched and ultimately futile proposal to “resettle” Sikhs living in British Columbia’s lower mainland in British Honduras (now Belize). The second was legislative. In 1908, then minister of the interior and future prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King declared

that the native of India is not a person suited to this country, that as accustomed as many of them are to the conditions of a tropical climate, and possessing manners and customs so unlike our own people, their ability to readily adapt themselves to surroundings entirely different could not do other than entail an amount of privation and suffering which renders a discontinuance of such immigration most desirable in the interests of Indians themselves.

(Basran and Bolaria 2003: 102)

The result of King’s social and environmental paternalism was the adoption of an Order in Council, later known as the *Continuous Journey Regulation*. The legislation was a watershed moment in Sikh-Canada relations, animated as it was by the ill-fated journey of the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese ship chartered in 1914 by Gurdit Singh, a Sikh trader and entrepreneur who brought 376 mostly Sikh Indian passengers to Vancouver. With few exceptions, the passengers were not permitted to land in Canada, and the ship remained anchored in Vancouver harbor for two months only to be forced to return to India.

Nativist desires to shut down Sikh migration to Canada in the early years of the twentieth century was met with sustained Sikh resistance. Sikhs sought out new forms of solidarity and modes of defiance. The fledgling Sikh community in Vancouver solidified their social bonds with fellow Panjabis. The Khalsa Diwan Society on Vancouver’s Second Avenue functioned not only as Sikh

religious space but as pan-Indian political and social space, providing shelter and assistance for new migrants (Dusenbery 2008). Such solidarity was instrumental in providing monetary, material, and psychological support those aboard the *Komagata Maru* in the summer of 1914.

Transnational bonds of solidarity against colonial hegemony and local exclusionary policies were also forged. At the forefront of this resistance was Ghadar. The San Francisco-based Ghadar movement sought to coordinate “revolt” against British colonialism in India. But they also mobilized to resist exclusionary policies in Canada and the United States, particularly those targeting Indian migration restrictions, voting and citizenship rights, and broader issues of social justice and political enfranchisement. Amrit Deol argues Ghadar resistance was inherently a Sikh mode of resistance. “The Ghadar members’ articulations of rebellion and freedom relied heavily on the histories of Sikh gurus and a pre-colonial history of Sikh resistance and rebellion to articulate different understandings freedom” (Deol 2019). Thus, pan-Indian solidarity, Ghadar, and the Khalsa Diwan Society reveal important modes of Sikh transnational life in Canada.

But Sikhs also cultivated bonds with other minoritarian groups, notably through marriage. For example, of the unions involving Sikhs in Alberta prior to 1940, four of six marriages were between Sikh men and African-American migrants to Canada (Hawley 2018). Similar unions are recorded in British Columbia. Despite the historical and cultural antipathy between Blacks and Panjabi Sikhs (and between Black and Brown persons generally, see Roy 2013), Sikhs and Blacks in Canada had much in common. They were both visible minorities. They were both subject to exclusionist policies and racial hostilities. And significantly, they shared a common history of colonization, imperialism, and slavery. A similar affiliation between Black and Brown can be seen in Ghadar’s ties to the NAACP, as well as to the National Women’s Party (NWP), in the United States. (Sinha 2013)

Religion, Culture, and Belonging in the Canadian Rhythm (1947–1980)

Liberalization of Canada’s immigration policies accompanied the postwar years. Canada actively sought educated migrants to bolster a depleted workforce. Of those who answered the call were Sikh professionals – engineers, accountants, and teachers – and Sikh students wanting to pursue professional degrees at Canadian universities. The influx of migrants to Canadian university cities was spurred by the adoption of a multiculturalism policy in 1971. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sikhs navigated the currents self-understanding – both “religious” and “cultural” – in the uncharted waters of Canada’s new liberal multicultural policy.

With an increasing population and a shift in state policy, Sikhs made space for themselves within Canadian liberal conceptions of religion, ethnicity, and the state. Verne Dusenbery (2008) has observed how Canadian liberal ideology is premised on the separation of the sacred and secular (church and state), a distinction that animates Canadian multicultural practice. Religious institutions and organizations are eligible for various forms of tax relief; ethnic or cultural institutions and organizations are eligible for public funding available through various multicultural initiatives (Dusenbery 2008: 167–168).

Canadian liberal multiculturalism is discordant with *gurbani* (poetics) and *gurmat* (teaching) of the Sikh Gurus. The Gurus taught past the religious/secular binary. The Sikh non-binary mode of thinking is expressed in several ways throughout Sikh history but finds its most lucid expression in *miri-piri* (political-religious). It is architecturally embodied in the Harmandir Sahib and Akal Takht and colloquially in the expression *degh-tegh-fateh* (cooking pot-sword-victory), affirming that the use of arms is but an extension of the giving of alms as a way to enact justice. This unity (*Ek Oankar*) is the ground of Sikh being and self-understanding. The centripetal gravity of multiculturalism engendered a liberal (re)framing of Sikh identity in the public sphere.

Increased migration and the adoption of multicultural policy affected Sikh life in Canada in at least three ways. Migration and multiculturalism (1) altered patterns of Sikh religious practice and generated new cultural associations, (2) produced fault lines in gurdwara leadership, (3) produced a religio-cultural disconnect between Sikhs who had established themselves in Canada and those who had more recently arrived, and (4) spawned a cultural and existential divide between first generation migrants and their Canadian-born children.

First, Sikhs across the country began to function in line with nativist rhythms such as Sunday “religious” services to better fit the pattern of the Canadian work week (Dusenbery 2008). At the same time, new “ethnic” and “cultural” institutions emerged to protect and promote “Indo-Canadian” political, cultural, social, and social service objectives (Dusenbery 2008: 175). “Indo-Canadians” availed themselves of the opportunities for funding that such “cultural” institutions could provide. “Indo-Canadian” cultural associations such as the National Association of Canadians of Origins in India (NACOI), the India Club of Vancouver, and the Panjabi Central Association emerged (Dusenbery 2008: 175). As the majority of persons of Indian origin in Canada at this time were Sikh, “India” and “Panjabi” in the names of these “cultural” associations were often functional metonyms for “Sikh.” By the end of the 1970s, Sikhs had inserted themselves into the nativist multicultural narrative and in the process framed their public self-representation as “Indo-Canadian” or as “Panjabi.”

This marks an important shift for Sikh life in the Canadian nation-state. Once excluded and often pressured to “blend in” under coercive legislation and hostile nativist sentiment in the first half of the twentieth century, the multicultural turn of the 1960s and 1970s prompted Sikhs to assert their distinctive “Indian identity” and to “stand out.” In this way, new migration and multicultural policy assimilated Sikh life into the Canadian national imaginary, but they did so at the expense of publicly eliding the foundational unity (*Ek Oankar*) of Sikh self-understanding in favor of Canadian ideological assumptions, which distinguished religion, culture, and politics.

Second, increased migration and multicultural policy gave rise to discord between Sikhs who had established themselves earlier and those more recent arrivals. The Sikh external form became a subject of debate with respect to gurdwara leadership. Dusenbery (2008) notes there were those who held gurdwara leadership that ought to be in the hands of those (males) who kept a visibly Sikh form, and those who believed gurdwara leadership positions ought to be open to Sikh (males) who had cut their hair as a means of approximating the Canadian nativist norm. This fault line in the community at times resulted in the formation of new gurdwaras in the same locale. At the same time, the Sikh external form among generations of (male) migrants revealed the aporia of state policy and public sentiment.

Third, notwithstanding multicultural policy, some new migrants chose to cut their hair, often at the urging of previously settled family members, to approximate the nativist norm. The decision to abandon one’s *kesh* (uncut hair) underscores the enduring anti-immigrant sensibilities entrenched in Canadian public consciousness and to their impact on Sikh private and corporate life.

Fourth, the 1970s produced the first wave of second generation, Canadian-born Sikhs. Though born and raised in Canada, many were confronted with racism from nativist Canadians. R. Radhakrishnan (2003) emphasizes the highly contextualized nature of identity politics between generations of Hindus living in the United States. Echoing Radhakrishnan, Indian-born and Canadian-born Sikhs experienced racism and exclusion, attitudes that remained deeply entrenched in the national myth of racial homogeneity. However, Indian-born and Canadian-born Sikhs experienced this racism differently. Indian-born Sikh experienced racism *as migrants*, as those who had “come from elsewhere.” Canadian-born Sikhs experienced racism *as natural-born citizens* and in this way occupied an ambiguous, interstitial space between their own Sikh self-understanding (subjectivity), populist resistance (nativism), and belonging (liberal multiculturalism) (Nijhawan and Arora 2013).

Solidarity and Discord, Vilification and Recognition (1980s and 1990s)

Violence, atrocities, and trauma formed the backdrop of global Sikh life in the 1980s. The Indian Army's attack on the Golden Temple complex and other sites beginning in June 1984 and the pogroms against Sikhs in November that year have been indelibly stamped in Sikh collective memory. Fearing for their safety and security, Sikh asylum seekers, political refugees, and illegal migrants made their way to countries around the world, including Canada, often accompanied by unbearable psychological trauma.

The assault on the Golden Temple Complex precipitated protests by Sikhs around the world. Demonstrations calling for justice and revenge were held in major cities across Canada. Almost immediately, Canadian Sikhs broke with the pan-Indian cultural organizations they helped to establish in the preceding decades, and new Sikh-centered organizations were founded. Critical of the Indian government, Sikhs in Canada asserted their identity as distinctively "Sikh" rather than as "Indian." The World Sikh Organization (Canada and US), International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) were founded, and the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) gained support in Canada, as well as in the United States and Britain. In Canada, these groups – particularly the WSO and the ISYF – frequently competed with one another for funds as well as for control of gurdwaras (Tatla 1999). However, Sikhs found themselves in indeterminate space with respect to Canadian policy. On the one hand, Sikhs claimed their place within Canadian multiculturalism "as Sikhs" (rather than "as Indian"), at the same time they asserted their sovereignty "as Sikhs," thereby speaking past multiculturalism's premise of the separation of religion and the state. While 1984 produced an unprecedented show of Sikh solidarity, this solidarity curtailed Sikh ties with "pan-Indian" organizations and strained Sikh relations with the Indian state.

To the extent that 1984 galvanized Sikh solidarity, the 1985 bombing of Air India 182, which exploded off the coast of Ireland killing all 329 people on board – both Canadian and Indian nationals – fractured that solidarity. The majority of Sikhs distanced themselves from those Sikhs who were implicated in the Air India bombing. Groups such as Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) and the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) argued direct action was required to secure Khalistan. Others, notably the World Sikh Organization (WSO), argued for Khalistan but were prepared to work through legal and constitutional mechanisms. Still others remained staunch Indian nationalists, such as Ujjal Dosanjh, then premier of British Columbia and unrelenting critic of Khalistan, who thought Sikh interests were best served within the Indian state.

Not surprisingly, there were both populist and state responses to the Air India bombing. The valorization of Sikhs in the first half of the twentieth century as brave defenders of the empire and the cultural recognition effected by the multiculturalism policy of the 1970s gave way to nativist vilification and exclusion of those Sikhs who kept their hair, turban, and *kirpan*. These accoutrements that were once celebrated in nativist circles were now singled out to disparage and to stigmatize Sikhs as violent, as seditious, and as terrorists.

To be sure, both clean-shaven Sikhs and those who kept their hair were active in the call for Khalistan. But it was those Singhs who maintained the external form – Khalistani or not – who were overwhelmingly vilified as terrorists in the media, both in Canada and in India (Mann 2017). The ISYF and BKI were listed as terrorist organizations and banned in Canada, and calls for Sikhs to leave their proverbial "political baggage" at home reverberated in public circles. At the same time, Canadians were reminded not to forget the Air India tragedy (Murphy 2012). Liberal secularism was leveraged to vilify Sikhs. The Sikh external form was used to condemn what the Canadian (and Indian) states framed as "religious" acts of violence (particularly the "militancy" of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, or those "responsible" for

the Air India bombing) while at the same time to sanction state violence (namely, state intervention in June 1984 and the criminalization of Sikh organizations). In both Canada and India, Sikh criticisms of state-sanctioned violence, calls for justice, and agitation for Khalistan were framed as commensurable, and dangerous. In short, Sikh criticism of the state was seditious, and sedition signaled terrorism.

Sikh communities in Canada experienced growing pains throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The number of Sikhs in Canada more than doubled between 1981 and 2001, and the communities across the country were becoming increasingly diverse. On the religious front, organizations such as the 3HO and Nanaksar, who had been active earlier, saw their numbers grow. Namdharis and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha (AKJ) became more visible. Culturally, Ramgarhias who had arrived in small numbers at the beginning of the twentieth century, began to arrive in larger numbers precipitated by their exile from Uganda in 1972 and began to establish their own societies and gurdwaras.

The growth and diversification of the community brought to the fore new points of contention. The most public of these had to do with the issue of “tables and chairs.”

In Surrey, British Columbia, conflict erupted in the late 1990s over whether or not tables or chairs should be utilized in the community dining area, or *langar* hall. . . . While in India it is traditional to sit on the floor, early Sikh immigrants to BC . . . adapted to life there by installing tables and chairs in the *langar*. The Akal Takht (a central authority within the structure of the SGPC) issued a ruling in 1998 that this practice should not be followed, but not all Gurdwaras . . . complied with the ruling, challenging the power of these central authorities to shape Sikh life outside of their original mandate. This debate, however, did not take place in a vacuum and is not only about a matter of doctrine and practice; as Kamala Nayar [2004] has pointed out, the tables and chairs issue emerged after an election in an important Gurdwara resulted in the ousting of a group sympathetic to the separatist movement for an independent state in the Indian Panjab.

(Murphy 2015: 179)

In several instances, debates descended into violence in gurdwaras, capturing the attention of the Canadian media (Depalma 1997). Impasses often resulted in breakaway groups establishing their own gurdwaras in the same city, sometimes only blocks away from one another.

If growth and diversification revealed a multiplicity of Sikh life-worlds, increased demands for public recognition provided a common purpose. Demands for public and legal recognition of the Sikh external form monopolized Sikh-state relations in Canada during the 1990s. Predictably, uncut hair, the turban, and *kirpan* stood at the forefront of these demands. Context is important here. The vilification of Sikhs in the long wake of the 1980s and the ongoing persecution of Sikhs in India in the 1990s heightened the need for recognition and protection.

At the same time, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the *Multiculturalism Act* (1988) had come into force. The *Charter* in particular provided for the freedom of conscience and religion, and the equality in and before the law without discrimination of race, national or ethnic origin, or religion.

In the 1990s, Sikhs were compelled to bring their demands before various boards and courts. Early challenges met with mixed success.

Gian Singh Aujala won his case against Pincurtan Security when he was sacked for changing his appearance. In 1986, an Edmonton boy, Suneel Singh Tuli, was allowed to wear the *kirpan* at school after a ruling by the Human Rights Commission. Another pupil at Peel School was

also involved in a *kirpan* case that dragged on for two years before he was allowed to wear it. Ranjit Singh was discharged from Canada's Armed Forces over the helmet issue.

(Tatla 2003: 191)

In 1994, Kuldip Singh won his case to wear the turban in a Winnipeg Legion. Pardeep Singh Nagra challenged the Ontario Amateur Boxing Association in 1999 to keep his beard. In a landmark 2006 Supreme Court decision, Gurbaj Singh Multani, with the assistance of WSO lawyers, won his *Charter* challenge for the right of Sikhs to wear the *kirpan* in public (*Multani v Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys* 2006; Stoker 2007).

Perhaps the most public and divisive of these challenges was the case of RCMP officer Baltej Singh Dhillon, who in 1990 won the right to wear his turban while on duty.

[The decision] led to a national debate which became highly emotional with petitions and several court rulings. Barbara Sparrow, a member of Parliament from Calgary, presented a petition signed by 68,582 to the Canadian Parliament in October 1989, demanding that the RCMP remain a "Canadian institution" by retaining its uniform.

(Tatla 2003: 191)

In Calgary, "a poster calendar caricatured a Sikh member of the RCMP in a turban, identified as 'Sgt. Kamell Dung'" (Bergman 1990). Echoing Kalra et al. (2005), nativist opposition to turbans in the RCMP was rooted in the racialized claims that it would erode Canadian national identity, symbolism, and institutions. Nativist opposition was also fueled by the fear that such accommodation would attract further "ethnic baggage" of the kind seen in the mid-1980s (Tatla 2003: 192). Despite the punctuated success for Sikh recognition and legal protection, nativist imaginaries of national homogeneity endured. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Sikhs in Canada navigated the swells of multiple, complex, and intersecting diasporic spheres.

Life at the Nexus: The 2000s

Sikhs in Canada have garnered a broad public visibility since the turn of the millennium. They have been successful in securing greater religious, cultural, and legal recognition. At the same time, nativist constructions of Sikhs as seditious, undesirable Others resurfaced, challenging Sikh space in Canada's liberal multiculturalism. With new social media and new modes of activism, Sikhs have created and animated a range of de-territorialized spaces and modes of belonging.

In the 2000s, Sikhs have enjoyed increased multicultural recognition. Sikhs won exemptions from motorcycle helmet laws in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. Sikh history garnered symbolic recognition in the form of postage stamps celebrating the tri-centenary of the Khalsa Panth in 1999, as well as a stamp commemorating the centenary of the *Komagata Maru* in 2014. That same year, the Canadian government issued a formal apology for their mishandling of the *Komagata Maru* "incident." Plaques and memorials of the *Komagata Maru* have been erected along Vancouver's waterfront. In some Canadian cities, streets have been renamed in Sikh-centric fashion (Smith 2019; Ward 2018), while buildings that bear the names of those that have sought to exclude Sikhs have been "unnamed" (Boyton 2019). Bukkam Singh's grave, the only Sikh in the First World War buried in Canada, in Kitchener-Waterloo, is the site of annual Remembrance Day commemorations. And in 2017, the Ontario Legislative Assembly passed a motion to recognize the pogroms of 1984 as a genocide (Khalil 2017).

Since their arrival in Canada, Sikhs have been politically active. Sikh engagement in the 2000s has been commonplace across political jurisdictions – municipal, provincial, and federal, as well as domestically and internationally. In 1993, Gurbux Malhi became the first turbaned Sikh elected to Parliament. By 2015, no less than seventeen Sikh MPs were elected, four of whom held cabinet positions. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau controversially boasted at the time, “I have more Sikhs in Cabinet than Modi” (PTI 2016). These federal wins were accompanied by Sikh representation at the provincial level as well as in the judicial sphere, the latter exemplified by the elevation of former WSO lawyer Palbinder Kaur Shergill to the Supreme Court of British Columbia (Lau 2017). The public profile of Sikhs in the 2000s has made it increasingly difficult for nativist claims of national homogeneity remain unchallenged.

But Sikh integration into Canadian liberal multiculturalism has drawn criticism from Sikhs themselves. Some have pointed out that multiculturalism has given rise to a harmful identity politics, particularly in terms of Indian solidarity. A focus group of Sikhs recently concluded, “[M]ulticulturalism has been misused by the political class to play identity-based politics which has been detrimental. Over time, this has resulted in divisions within South Asians” (Canadian Online News Editor 2019). Still others have observed that identity politics has spilled into transnational politics in Panjab and more broadly with the Indian state.

Sikhs in recent years have had to confront specters of their Canadian past. The last three federal elections (2015, 2019, and 2021) witnessed a resurgence of nationalist temperament. Populist sentiment was expressed in the familiar racialized tropes surrounding immigration, jobs and the economy, and “Canadian values.” Election signs were vandalized with racist graffiti, and social media platforms were rife with both implicit and explicit claims of White supremacy. Canada’s populist politics found partisan support to greater or lesser degrees in established political parties. But new parties, such as the People’s Party of Canada, were founded to leverage this ethno-populist resurgence.

In a similar vein, after a failed attempt in 2013 to introduce a provincial Charter of Values (Bill 60), the *Assemblée nationale du Québec* (Quebec’s provincial assembly) gave assent to Bill 21 in 2019. Bill 21, “An Act respecting the laicity of the State” provided that new hires in the civil service or in positions of coercive authority in the province be banned from wearing religious symbols. The WSO challenged Bill 21, and several Canadian cities passed municipal resolutions condemning the bill (WSO 2019). Nevertheless, some Sikhs chose to leave the province (Gilmore with Luft 2019). The new populist politics and Quebec’s Bill 21 are but two examples that resurrect the specter of the *Komagata Maru* and a past that continues to disrupt contemporary Sikh space and belonging in Canada.

Recently, Sikhs in Canada have also confronted the apparition of 1985’s Air India bombing. In December 2018, the Liberal government released its 2018 *Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada* (Public Safety Canada 2018). The *Report*, without supporting justification, linked the Sikh community with extremism and violence. The WSO jumped on the blunder by hosting cross-country public forums – #AskCanadianSikhs – to address the issue and to strategize how best to respond. By May 2019, WSO mobilization had pressured Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Minister Ralph Goodale to announce the language of the *Report* would be changed. “Instead of ‘Sikh extremism’ future reports would, if it was appropriate, discuss threats posed by ‘extremists who support violent means to establish an independent state within India’” (Rabsen 2019).

In 2007, the Dashmesh Darbar in Surrey, British Columbia, displayed pictures of Shaheed Talwinder Singh Parmar on floats in the annual *nagar kirtan*. The Canadian government had long speculated that Parmar was the “master mind” behind the 1985 Air India bombing. The topic of Talwinder Singh Parmar resurfaced in 2019 when Jagmeet Singh, leader of Canada’s New Democratic

Party, was asked by CBC journalist Terry Milewski whether or not Singh condemned terrorism and the valorizing of Parmar (Fernando 2017). Jagmeet Singh has been openly critical of the Indian state and was instrumental in having the actions of the Indian state in 1984 and beyond recognized as “genocide” in Ontario’s legislature. As in the preceding decades, Sikh critique of Indian state-sanctioned violence and the call for Khalistan remain inextricable in the Canadian imaginary. The concern over Parmar’s image, and Milewski’s questioning of Singh, evokes an enduring discourse of sedition, of undesirability, and of Othering.

The 2000s have witnessed a reframing of Khalistani activism in Canada. Groups such as the WSO, the ISYE, and the BKI, which were formed in the wake of June 1984 and that led the call for Khalistan in the 1980s and 1990s, have been transformed or their influence significantly diminished. But new Khalistani organizations have emerged, refashioned as “The Sikh Movement” or Sikh *lehar*. Prominent in Canada is the Sikh Liberation Front, an international *jathebandi* committed to developing Panthic leadership. The SLF “mobilizes the Sikh panth to embody its indigenous sovereignty in the fight for Khalistan,” and to actively resist “colonial *dispossession* and foreign occupation by asserting its right to sovereignty” (Sikh Liberation Front 2018).

The SLF has cultivated solidarity with other colonized minoritarian groups in Canada, most notably with the Kwantlen First Nation on whose land many gurdwaras in British Columbia’s lower mainland stand (M. Singh 2018). Similarly, in 2018 Khalsa Aid International partnered with “the people of Ahousaht First Nation to launch the Maggie Sutej Ahousaht Project, pledging financial aid to fund youth programs and search and rescue operations” (H. Singh 2018). The initiative highlights intertwined history of Sikhs and the Ahousaht First Nation. “[T]he project references the *HMS Sutej*, a British warship used to attack the Ahousaht people in Vancouver, destroying nine villages. The British named the ship after the Battle of Sutej in Punjab, India, where they defeated the Sikh Empire in 1846” (H. Singh 2018).

The shared history of imperialism and genocide of Sikhs (in India) and First Nations in Canada presents both possibilities and challenges. On the one hand, globalization and transnationalism have given rise to de-territorialized conceptions of the nation. Such de-territorialization has created the space for “multiple and overlapping sovereignties” (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004 in P. Singh 2019: 20). On the other hand, the promise of such intersectional sovereignty has its challenges. Kalra et al. (2005) argue diasporic claims of sovereignty are predicated on the idea that land and culture are not natural sources of identity. But First Nations’ sovereignty *is* bound to territory. Sikh–First Nations associations may help to interrupt Canadian ethnopolitical discourses and state-sanctioned violence. But when it comes to territorialized land claim rights and sovereignty, such solidarity may not be enough.

A new generation of Sikhs in Canada have carved out diasporic spaces and have occupied them in very different ways. Since 2008, Calgary’s Harnarayan Singh has made an international impact as co-host and commentator on *Hockey Night in Canada in Panjabi*. Now a recognized public figure, Singh resides at the nexus of nativism (the broadcast is on “mainstream,” government-supported Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)), liberal multiculturalism (*HNIC in Panjabi* is geared towards an “ethnic” audience), Sikh self-understanding (Singh is *amritdhari*), *Panjabiyat* (the broadcast is in Panjabi), and transnationalism (the broadcast is accessible to an international audience). As a hockey personality, he unsettles the racialized (and imagined) boundaries and discourse of Canada’s “national game.”

By contrast, Canadian-born Lilly Singh, a.k.a. Superwoman and former YouTube sensation, has carved out diasporic space on network television in the United States with the launch of her show *A Little Late with Lilly Singh*. An openly bisexual Brown woman, Singh embodies a mode of Panjabiness that has tended to reside the margins of Sikh life. However, Lilly Singh has been criticized

for her appropriation of Black cultural practices and tropes, as well as stereotyping first-generation Panjabi Sikh migrants (CoolieCollective 2019). Unlike Harnarayan Singh, whose diasporic space is framed as “multicultural” programming, Lilly Singh has come under fire for leveraging her space at the expense of religious, cultural, and minoritarian Others.

Sikh life-worlds in Canada are in constant interplay with Canadian nativism, liberalism, transnationalism, Panjabi cultural forms, and Sikh subjectivity. Within *and* between each of these spheres is a range of expression, often accompanied by a host of tensions and paradoxes. Some of these tensions and contradictions have been productive, particularly those where Sikhs have lobbied for inclusion, recognition, and protection. Other tensions, however, have produced spaces of interstitial indeterminateness. Enduring ethno-national imaginaries, racism and exclusion, questions of citizenship and belonging, relations with other minoritarian groups, and the (re)presentation of Sikhs endure. At the same time, they hold the possibility of being creative sites of tension for Sikh life-worlds in Canada.

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SIKHS IN/OF AFRICA

Imperial, Postcolonial,
and Transnational Articulations*Anneeth Kaur Hundle***Introduction**

In 2008, a group of Sikh congregants who patronized the Ramgariah Sikh Temple in Old Kampala in Kampala, Uganda, invited me as a guest of their *sangat* (community) to join them on a series of road trips across the country during annual *Vaisakhi* celebrations. We passed through small towns in which Sikh gurdwaras sat mostly empty, with the occasional caretakers or *granthis* (readers) hired from the Punjab to oversee them. The group I traveled with included a few repatriated and expatriate British/East African Asian Sikhs who contributed philanthropy to the upkeep of the gurdwaras on their visits to Uganda, mostly new Punjabi Sikh migrants and even a few members of the mixed-race Afro-Sikh community that persisted in Uganda. The annual, ritual nature of the journey from town to town, from gurdwara to gurdwara, regenerated the Sikh tradition in post-expulsion Uganda, creating territorial and affective attachments to African landscapes. A Sikh community was being precariously reshaped in post-Asian expulsion Uganda, despite tense relationships with Africa and Africans. Despite the expulsion of the multigenerational Ugandan Punjabi Sikh community by President Idi Amin in 1972, our journey gestured towards Sikh community-building and *Sikhi* itself as a dynamic process that was shaped through racial consciousness, even as it cross-cut racial, religious, ethnic, and caste barriers in contemporary Uganda.

Sikhs and the Sikh tradition have had a sustained encounter with Indian Ocean economies and societies, the African Continent, and indigenous Africans since at least the nineteenth century. Unlike merchant-trader communities from other regions of South Asia, Punjabi and Sikh settlement in East Africa primarily occurred in tandem with the formation of the British Raj, and the European imperialist partition and annexation of the African Continent and British colonization of African territories, including the East African and Ugandan Protectorates (and to some extent in German East Africa after the Second World War), and the expansion of the British Empire into the “inter-regional arena” (Bose 2009) of the Indian Ocean. Although contemporary Sikh communities reside across the vast and complex African continent, because Sikh and Punjabi migration from Northern India was deeply imbricated in the British colonization of Eastern and Central Africa, their historical sites of engagement have primarily been in East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, and some parts of Central and Southern Africa. It is estimated that between 50 and 100,000 Sikhs currently live in East Africa. However, we need more detailed statistics tracing Sikh demographics

across the historical time period I trace in the chapter. This work is complicated by the transnational and transregional character of the African Sikh diaspora across Indian Ocean and North Atlantic territories and their multiple citizenship statuses in the post-expulsion/post-exodus era.

The Sikh/Punjabi encounter with Africans and the African continent has been marginalized in at least three different domains of scholarly inquiry: (1) the study of global Sikh diasporas, which primarily focus on Sikh migration and settlement from Punjab to the imperial and settler colonial states in the West, such as the UK, US, and Canada; (2) the study of Indian/South Asian diaspora communities in Africa, in which Sikhs are primarily constructed as an ethno-religious identity and nested within “Asian” or “Indian” racialized identity formations on the African Continent; (3) and new field formations that encompass the study of the Indian Ocean World, the Global South, and transnational Afro-Asian Studies. I argue that Sikh engagement with Africans and the African continent is a central historical, geographic, intellectual, and onto-epistemological node for understanding global Sikh experience, the Sikh tradition and Sikh life-worlds. By centering Sikh immigrant-indigenous African relationalities in Africa, it is possible to make legible Afro-Sikh entanglements across the Indian Ocean world (including South Asia), and in relation to Black/African diaspora in North Atlantic contexts. By unsettling the normative nationalist, secular, and racial/cultural knowledge claims of area studies and other disciplinary formations that make Afro-Sikh identities, subjectivities, communities, and relationalities illegible, we can better formulate a contemporary, critically minded Sikh studies as a global field of study that is responsive to Sikh life in African/Global South contexts.

I examine the encounter between Sikhs and the Sikh tradition with (Eastern) Africa and Africans through four key periodizations: (1) British imperial interests in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Eastern Africa and ensuing Indian sub-imperialist interests in East Africa, including colonial racial and labor policies and the ensuing settler colonial ambitions and racial consciousness of Punjabi Sikh settlers and migrants to East Africa; (2) the era of decolonization, anticolonial nationalism, and nation-building across the Indian Ocean world and in East Africa, focusing on East African Sikh involvement in African anticolonial liberation struggles and Afro-Asian solidarities; (3) African postcolonial nativist nationalism and the de-Indianization of East Africa, including the impacts of East African Asian expulsion/exodus, displacement, and resettlement; and (4) contemporary East African Sikh return migration and new migrations of Sikhs to East Africa from India in a shifting geopolitical context of US empire and the War on Terror, neoliberal globalization, and new geopolitical and trade relationships between India and East African countries, known as South-South Cooperation. I examine the implications for disciplinary formations in which Sikhs and the Sikh tradition have been framed, as well as potential contributions to the growth of a more critically framed Sikh studies and complex study of the Sikh world.

Sikh/Punjabi Imperial and Colonial Encounters With East Africa and Africans

East Africa was integrated into a world system and global economy constituted by regional indigenous African trade, trans-Indian Oceanic mercantile trade, and the eventual development of the East African slave trade (Reid 2002). The entwinement of these African traditional economies with regional and global trade led to the expansion of small-scale indigenous communities into highly centralized kingdoms and polities (Reid 2002). Indian settlement in East Africa occurred on the Swahili Coast and in Zanzibar in relation to the expanding triangular Indian Ocean trade that linked the East African interior with the coast, the Arabian Peninsula, and India. The Omani Sultanate’s move from Muscat to Zanzibar in the mid-1800s led to the expansion of a wealthy mercantile class

of Indian traders and financiers (primarily from Gujarat), all of whom became engaged in the ivory, gum-copal, spice, and importantly, the indigenous African slave trade (Mamdani 1976).

The British colonization of India and ensuing development of the British Raj, the Partition of Africa by European imperialist powers, and British imperial expansion across the Indian Ocean and into East Africa in the late nineteenth century relied directly upon the use of Indian labor, migration, and settlement as an intermediary class of colonized subjects and imperial citizens on the African continent. British colonialism in East Africa utilized governance technologies of indirect rule colonialism based on racial and tribe distinctions and the creation of native elites, a technology that had already been deployed and perfected in the British Raj through the creation of communal religious and caste distinctions (Mamdani 1996, see also Dirks 2001). The British established the East African and Uganda Protectorates in the late nineteenth century (see Mangat 1969, Tinker 1974) and relied upon Indian labor migration to service British colonial interests from three major regions: Northern India and the Punjab, Gujarat, and Goa. Punjabis, and Sikhs in particular, came to East Africa in two distinct ways: first, Sikh regiments were utilized by the British in the imperial troops to suppress African indigenous rebellions against colonial rule, and second, they arrived as contracted indentured laborers who constructed the British-financed Uganda Railway from Mombasa on the Swahili Coast to Lake Victoria in Uganda (Mangat 1969). Hugh Tinker notes that after the European abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade came the paradoxical development of a “second slavery,” or the indentured labor system that exported Indian labor overseas to British colonial territories, including Eastern and Southern Africa and the Caribbean. In East Africa, the British foreign office recruited 31,983 Indian indentured laborers for the construction of the Uganda Railway over the period 1896–1902 (Mangat 1969: 31–32, Metcalf 2007), where 10–15% of the indentured would renew their contracts or return to East Africa on fresh indentures after their three-year contracts ended (Mangat 1969: 37). The British recruited Indian indentured labor from North India in Lahore, with Karachi serving as the main port of embarkation. Most of the railway workers were Punjabis – Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs – and they were pejoratively referred to as “coolies” by the British.

Generally, scholars agree that this surge of indentured Indian migrants was rather small and short-lived in relation to the more expansive racialized economic system of Indian indenture and plantation labor that developed in South Africa and the Caribbean. However, indentured labor (contracted railway work) in British East Africa resulted in new trends in migration and settlement: those that remained after the railway was completed turned to merchant trade or other skilled labor and settled in the new colonies, becoming settlers and forming new families and transnational kinship ties across the Indian Ocean, maintain links between East Africa and South Asia. East African Sikh indentured laborers and others became settlers who both transgressed and reproduced existing racial, class, and caste stratifications in their new homeland. They brought their spiritual traditions with them by building religious institutions in the colonial urban centers and townships that developed along the railway line. Punjabi Sikhs from the Ramgarhia caste were especially renowned artisans in East Africa. They were carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons, and they attained newfound upward class mobility as the *fundi* class of laborers in British East Africa. *Jat* Sikhs contributed to the transportation and construction sectors as drivers and builders, while other Sikhs continued to labor in colonial police forces, especially in Kenya.

More settlers migrated to East Africa via trans-Indian Oceanic kinship networks that linked East Africa to the Punjab, Surat, and Kutch in North and Northeast India. Some Punjabis who were able to access entitlements to land participated in agricultural practices near the railway line, while Gujarati Hindu and Muslim merchants sold essential commodities in small *dukans* that fanned out into small townships off the railway line. Specific ethnic groups, religions, and sects dominated

mercantile trade: Muslims (Sunnis and Ismailis) and Hindus (Lohanas and Patidars). Indian (primarily Gujarati) merchants became a “middleman” class that bought cotton and other agricultural products from indigenous African peasants and sold them to small-scale ginneries and other processing firms of both British and Indian origin (Mamdani 1976). In exchange, *dukamwallas* sold manufactured imports originating from factories in Britain or India that were circulating in the colony.

This large-scale transplantation of Indian labor into the interior of the continent serviced the extractive nature of the colonial economy and resulted in the imposition of the institutions of British India in East Africa, including modern technologies of law and order, currency, and administrative infrastructures. All together, these processes exemplified India’s “sub-imperial role” in the British Empire and Indian Ocean realm via the work of Indian “intermediary imperial and colonial subjects” (Metcalf 2007). Finally, the officially sponsored migration of indentured laborers compelled more Indian migration, including from Punjab, into the interior of the continent. Between 1890 and 1920, economic opportunities in British East Africa attracted between 10 and 20,000 “free” Indian migrants, increasing substantially during the interwar years (Gregory 1993: 304, Nagar 1996: 63).

Even though the stereotypical racialized figure of “the Indian” in East Africa is associated with the Gujarati merchant-trader, or *dukamwalla*, in actuality, Indian migration to East Africa was much more complex. Although Punjabis and Sikhs were less numerous demographically than Gujarati merchants, they brought skilled labor to the colony. They were also essential to the security apparatus of the colonial project, and they were especially recruited within the British imperial troops and within the colonial police forces. Europeans understood Sikhs to be both inherently violent and martial – and thus their colonial racialization as a “martial race” (Fox 1985). They were also considered to be loyal to the British and a reliable form of labor. J.S. Mangat writes,

The early years of the colonial period – particularly the last decade of the nineteenth century – thus had great significance for the penetration of the interior of East Africa by Indian immigrants. This was essentially a three-pronged phenomenon – based on the association of Indian skilled and semi-skilled staff, of Indian troops, and Indian traders with the Imperial effort in the territories.

(1969: 61)

Significantly, the British colonial government governed both indigenous (native) Africans and (non-native) immigrant Indians (referred to as “Asians”) based on a race hierarchy and associated urban entitlements and privileges for Indians. Although Indians were unable to own freehold land and resided in racially segregated urban areas only, they had more access to political rights, commerce, mobility, and imperial citizenship rights than their African counterparts.

Indians and Africans were also governed by anti-miscegenation laws that discouraged Indian and African interracial marriages. However, because caste, religious, and class distinctions were less pronounced among Punjabi Sikh and Muslim settlers, early migrants often married indigenous African women based on gendered immigration policies that discouraged the migration and settlement of Indian women in East Africa until at least the mid-nineteenth century. So one of the more understudied aspects of colonial Indian labor and migration policies with respect to the East African Punjabi Sikh community was the emergence of mixed-race Afro-Sikh communities, especially in the early and late colonial period. In Kenya, for example, Sikhs are commonly referred to as “*kalasingha*” by Kenyans of indigenous African descent, based on an early Sikh settler and carpenter of the name Kala Singh, who was well-integrated with African communities. Given the deeply entrenched racial and class stratifications in East African society, Sikh religiosity (ethics and practices), including the development of Sikh religious institutions (gurdwaras) without racial, religious, and

caste bar, Sikh communities engaged in regular intimacies with African communities even as they could also uphold civilizational, religious, and racial distinctions between themselves and indigenous Africans (see more in the next section). East African Sikhs developed around 40 gurdwaras (Sikh religious institutions), as well as schools and sports clubs (Salvadori 1996). While the management of the gurdwaras could reflect religious reform movements in India such as the Singh Sabha movement and (*Ramgarhia/Jat*) caste distinctions, all gurudwaras, schools, and sports clubs were integrated in the sense that they did not practice racial, religious, or caste bar. In the context of the rigidly stratified colonial society and Sikhs' own racial consciousness among Africans, community institutions helped create a degree of intimacy between Sikh and African communities in the context of broader African Indian racial tensions.

The Uganda Railway was and continues to be an important symbol of Indian – but more specifically, Punjabi Sikh migration and settlement in East Africa. Punjabi laborers sacrificed their lives for the colonial enterprise – many suffered illnesses and were even killed by lion predators as they built the line (Patterson 2013). As Thomas Metcalf writes, “Colonial officer Sir Harry Johnston described the Uganda Railway as a ‘wedge of India’ driven into the heart of Africa” (2007: 188). The railway was deeply associated with the so-called “Indian” or “Asian” question. This referred to European colonial officials increasing consternation surrounding the migration and settlement of Indians in East Africa throughout the nineteenth century. In South Africa, Thomas Blom Hansen describes a similar (gendered and sexualized) colonial discourse of “Indian penetration” in the correspondence among British officers in Natal (Hansen 2012: 29–30). The connotations of a proliferating, uncontrolled, and dominating Indian presence, moving from former arenas of containment on the East African coast into the “African interior,” permeated British colonial policies, which paradoxically sought to extract Indian labor yet also contain the migration and settlement of these same Indians. Here, the British mobilized a patronizing discourse of protecting “African interests” and maintaining discriminatory attitudes against Indians and South Asian presence – all while maintaining Anglo-European supremacy – within the British Empire and Eastern and South Africa for most of the twentieth century. Similar fears and concerns about the control of Indian migration, labor, and settlement would emerge in the late colonial period as East African Asians, including the Punjabi Sikh community, gained upward class mobility and began to develop their own enterprises, factories, and firms independent of and in competition with British interests, deploying their own Indian sub-imperialist and settler colonial ambitions on the African Continent. Certainly, Punjabi Sikhs, despite their sacrifices as indentured laborers, and despite discourses that celebrate their contributions to the European imperial colonial development of Africa and Africans as “pioneers” and “settlers,” also occupied uneasy settler colonial subjectivities, identities, and positionalities that left them at odds with their indigenous African counterparts. These ambivalent settler colonial subjectivities were expressed through a strong racial (caste and color-based), religious, and civilizational consciousness with respect to Africans. At the same time, the tenets of equality enshrined within the Sikh tradition that prohibit caste discrimination, Punjabi Sikhs were often the first to cross class and race lines to form intimacies and even political solidarities and alliances with Africans. These complexities were revealed during the struggle for majority rule in East Africa and India.

East African Sikhs, Anticolonialism, and Decolonization

The East African Asian Sikh community grew to sizable numbers during the post–World War II colonial urbanization period in Africa. Anticolonial nationalist sentiment was now beginning to circulate across the Indian Ocean and in East Africa. While Sikh political engagement had primarily been relegated to the domain of community institutional politics, Sikh men were now becoming

part of a nascent colonial public sphere as they participated as communal representatives of the non-Native Indian population in the Legislative Council. Sikhs were becoming more influenced by anticolonial movements in India, including the East African Indian National Congress, and through their engagement with political practices in other parts of the Sikh world, including in North America, where the Punjabi and Sikh diaspora had long formed the Ghadar Party and had forged connections with East African Asians (Sohi 2014). Since the colonial public sphere was exclusively a male domain that excluded women, it was progressive Marxist and Left-identified Punjabi Sikh men who first forged cross-racial alliances with African political activists in freedom struggles. In colonial Kenya, new political parties and organizations, especially trade unions, had multiracial membership in which Indian subjects, despite their colonial privileges with respect to Africans, could become politically actualized and conscious. Their alliances with the Indian freedom struggle led to their participation in the Kenyan freedom struggle – given their close association with policing and security institutions, Punjabi Sikhs would ultimately play important roles in assisting Mau Mau insurgents in anticolonial activity against the British Kenyan government (Aiyar 2015).

It is without question that East African Sikhs, as exemplified by the celebrated figure of Kenyan Sikh trade unionist Makhan Singh (Patel 2006), played a significant role in the broader politicization of the Indian diaspora in Kenya's freedom struggle and the creation of cross-racial and class alliances that mediated racial and class tensions between Indians and Africans in colonial society. However, it is also important to note that anticolonial activism was also mediated by a racial and civilizational consciousness in which East African Indians historically tended to fight for the maintenance of their imperial citizenship rights and entitlements from the British without dismantling the political and social struggles that maintained Africans' inferior status to Indians. This issue is most clearly exemplified by debates around Mohandas Gandhi's life in South Africa and in a broader Indian Ocean context that includes Africa, Africans, and Blackness. Thus, Indian alliances with indigenous Africans in political struggle could also be fraught and contested. It is also true that as a racial intermediary class, East African Asians could participate in collaborating and loyalist roles with colonial governments. More research on the political activities of Sikh communities in East Africa (both alliances with Africans and complicities with the British) during the anticolonial is needed to further establish the influence and reach of Sikhs' roles in freedom struggles that traversed both India and Africa in the Indian Ocean world.

New historiographical research in East Africa is examining how East African Asian political activity was deeply connected to broader decolonization movements that spanned the Indian Ocean context that connected the African continent with political and social movements in South Asia. The case of the Sikhs implores us to examine how East African political activity was also deeply connected to Sikh political activism in North America. Nonetheless, we now have a better sense of the expanding influence of Indian anticolonial political activity on the Indian diaspora in East Africa. We also now have a better understanding of the influence of the Partition of British India into independent Pakistan and India and its impacts on Indian diasporas in East Africa, including the role of the Indian government in influencing postcolonial policies in East Africa (Gregory 1971, Gupta 1975, Hundle under contract). Significantly, while historians of the Indian Ocean have tended to argue that the mobility of people and ideas became restricted with the rise of anticolonial nationalisms and nation-building in East Africa and South Asia, resulting in the creation of a more inward-looking diasporic East African Asian consciousness and identity, historians such as Sana Aiyar (2015) have argued that Indian politics were reflected by a racial consciousness informed by events taking place in both India and in East Africa, and that East African Indian subjects navigated both civilizational (India-based) homelands and territorial homelands (East Africa). While the scholarship thus far has focused mostly on the racial position, racialization, and racial subjectivity

and consciousness of a broadly framed Indian diaspora in general terms, more focus and research on East African Punjabi Sikhs specifically reveals the ways in which religious communities navigated anticolonial politics differently. Indeed, the Sikh tradition and its anti-imperialist and anticolonial political and ethical consciousness (traversing both secular and nonsecular ideas and practices) reverberated across transregional geographies that connected Sikhs positioned across the empire in East Africa with those in South Asia and even North America.

Exodus, Expulsion, Resettlement

Both the voluntary exoduses and forced expulsion of Indian communities, including East Africans Sikhs from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar, in the late 1960s and 1970s is widely understood to be the culmination of growing political, social, and economic grievances expressed through racial discourse and practice against South Asian/Indian and Arab groups in the postcolonial era (Taylor 2016, Aiyar 2015, Brennan 2012, Glassman 2011). While each East African nation practiced different policies of “Africanization,” or the “indigenization” of the public and private sectors of the state and economy (for example, legal schemes that circumscribed Indian migration and citizenship naturalization, trade, and other business licensing restrictions, limiting public sector employment and nationalizing private properties and assets), populist racial rhetoric against the Indian minority by the majoritarian indigenous African population was also growing. Aside from Tanzania, which created a pathway for national inclusion for Tanzanian-Asians through their participation in national socialism, national citizenship was increasingly defined by indigenous and autochthonous criteria and a racialized Black African majoritarian citizenship. The overall post-national independence was one of a sense of racialized insecurity and fear as South Asian/Indian communities were put in the position of losing their colonial-era accumulated racial and class privileges. In Uganda, populist anti-Indian grievances were the most pronounced. As a demographic urban minority, Ugandan Asians dominated the commercial and manufacturing economy, establishing racial and class barriers to African upward mobility, opportunity, and entitlements in the new nation. As a visible urban minority, wealthy and middle-class Indians displayed a conspicuous and wealthy urban lifestyle. Racial hostility against the Indian minority increased as Africans pointed to the anti-Black/African racisms and other humiliations they experienced at the hands of Indians in domestic settings and in the workplace. In Uganda, a nation without a European settler class, anti-Asian sentiment and outright xenophobia positioned Indians as scapegoats for larger structures of colonially orchestrated racial and class inequality. At the same time, Indians were also complicit in a strong racial consciousness and the racial and class exploitation of Africans in intimate settings.

In response to Africanization in Kenya, large numbers of East African Asians, including members of the Sikh community, began leaving the nation voluntarily, exercising their rights and entitlements to British citizenship, even as anti-Asian immigration restrictions in the UK expanded in the late 1960s. In Uganda, after taking power in 1971, Idi Amin launched an economic war against the entire Asian community, followed by announcing the forced mass expulsion of the entire population in late 1972. Over a three-month period, between 55,000 and 80,000 people of South Asian descent (British, Indian, and Ugandan legal citizens with multiple ethnic, religious, class, and caste affiliations) left the country as stateless refugees or as displaced migrants (see Hundle, under contract). In Tanzania, Tanzanian Sikhs who nationalized their businesses and assets were entitled to stay; others also made the decision to immigrate elsewhere.

Many East African Sikhs from Kenya and later Uganda settled as refugees and migrants in the United Kingdom, with smaller numbers migrating to Canada, the US, other European countries and India (Hundle, under contract). In her significant contribution to the study of this high era of

African nationalism and the exodus of East African Asians, Parminder Bhachu (1985) described the resettled East African Sikh communities in Britain as “twice-migrants,” assessing their continued affiliations to East Africa and India from the UK, particularly through marriage and kinship networks. British East African Sikh intellectuals, including Parminder Bhachu, Avtar Brah, and Pal Ahluwalia, and artists and cultural workers, such as Gurinder Chadha and Jatinder Verma, are part of this displaced generation of East African Asian Sikh migrants and their descendants. Their scholarly and cultural productions all speak to navigating the fraught political and racial milieu of decolonizing Africa and so-called “post-imperial” Britain. They retain their own unique identities and subjectivities as part of the East African Asian and Punjabi Sikh diaspora. So while some East African Asians cut their ties with Africa in the context of expulsion, many Sikhs were able to mobilize their political and other intimate ties with Africans to maintain connections with East Africa, establishing transnational networks of mobility, residence, labor, and kinship across the UK, East Africa, and even the Indian Punjab. Indeed, East African Sikhs in the diaspora continue to stake nostalgic, territorial, intergenerational, and settler colonial/developmentalist claims to East Africa, even as they reproduce communities inside and outside of the African continent (see Hundle, under contract).

Neoliberal East Africa, East African Asian Repatriations, and New Punjabi Sikh Migrations

Political and governmental crisis, neocolonialism in the form of the developmental state and aid dependency, economic liberalization through structural adjustment, and other extractive neoliberal policies completely reshaped East African nations in the years after political independence from British Empire. Generally, East African nations have shifted to a neoliberal model in which they seek the repatriation of East African Asian and Indian diasporic capital but also continue to strongly police the boundaries of racial inclusion and exclusion of people of East African Asian and South Asian descent.

In the intervening years since exodus or expulsion, many British/East African Sikh men continued to maintain transnational lives and a foothold in nations like Uganda through intimate political and business connections. In the mid-1990s, after Yoweri Museveni took power and established the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, the president formally invited Ugandan Asians from the UK and Canada to repossess their properties and businesses to help aid in the economic development of the nation. Today, several wealthy Ugandan Asian family firms have returned to the nation, reinvesting their capital in manufacturing and industry. There are 2,000 or so original Ugandan Asians (including members of the mixed-race, Afro-Sikh community). But there is now also a majority South Asian demographic of new migrants from India, Pakistan, and other parts of South Asia. Their migration is compelled by liberalization policies and growing political and economic insecurities in South Asia and migration restrictions in the post-9/11 context to the Global North. One important migration stream of informal or undocumented migrant-labors are Sikh male youth from the Indian Punjab. Here, we see that the Ugandan postcolonial state has shifted from policies of Indian racialized expulsion to the maintenance of Indian non-citizenship (in a formal, legal-judicial, and even substantive sense) and the exceptional incorporation of Ugandan Asian expatriates and new Indian entrepreneurs and migrants as investor-citizens (Hundle, under contract). In fact, today, most Ugandan Asian Punjabi Sikhs, with few exceptions, do not possess national citizenship, and new migrants do not naturalize as formal citizens but prefer to attain “Certificates of Permanent Residency” (Hundle, under contract). Although citizenship laws were amended in the mid-1990s to allow Ugandan Asians who could demonstrate multigenerational descent in the nation to reclaim citizenship, most have not done so because of their experience of

racial expulsion, their fears of political insecurity, and the possibility of future anti-Asian violence or expulsion (Hundle, under contract). Mirroring the transformation of the relationship between nation-state sovereignty and legal-juridical citizenship under the conditions of globalization – what anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1999) termed as “flexible citizenship,” returnees and new migrants increasingly invest in transnational and transregional practices of security-seeking. Uniquely, however, their practices are not necessarily (or only) responses to the instability of neoliberal globalization and economic insecurity. Instead, their practices are rooted in racialized insecurities, Afro-Asian tensions, and their history of estrangement from indigenous Africans.

Transnational East African Punjabi Sikhs negotiate their real and perceived sense of racial insecurity through investments in political and racial security that span both liberal and non-liberal strategies. In addition to formal government-led processes such as property repossession and the possibility of claiming national or even dual citizenship, East African Sikhs have diversified their legal-juridical citizenship statuses across multiple generations, created homes across multiple nation-states, participated in patronage practices and other traditional relationships of obligation and debt with African elites (Hundle, under contract). New migrants engage in securitization strategies, including sending remittances abroad to India or sending educated daughters abroad to marry in Western nations. In all these cases, an unfolding sense of racial insecurity, racial consciousness, and the desire for racial securitization permeates the everyday life of family, community, and social reproduction (Hundle, under contract). Indeed, religiosity and the spiritual domain is another critical domain racial security-seeking, the flourishing of intimacies with Africans, and territorial claim-making for Sikh communities in Africa.

Sikhs in Africa: Towards the Study of Racialized Religious Diasporic Communities

I identify two central challenges that impede the study of both the racialized and religious dimensions of the South Asian, specifically, Sikh diasporic subject in Africa. First, the focus on imperial/colonial racialization and the creation of “Subject Races” and native elites (Mamdani 1996) in Africa have resulted in an overarching focus on the racial category and secular subject position of the “Indian” in postcolonial Africa. The scholarship on the Indian diaspora in Africa emphasizes racial identity, which marginalized religious/spiritual/non-secular identities. Following indirect rule, racial community precedes religious community, such that religion is a “nested identity” in relation to the racialized “Asian or Indian” community. Secondly, Indian diasporic subjects in East Africa have largely been identified as economic subjects and associated with the economic realm, as in the case of Gujarat trading community. Where they have been understood as political subjects, they are secular subjects and always either/or understood to occupy positions of (settler)colonial complicity or to be victims of colonialism, they are also regarded as either resisters or collaborators in anti-imperial and anticolonial projects.

Indian postcolonial and political theory continues to be influential in African studies, although it still often operates through secular frameworks. Partha Chatterjee’s (2006, 2011) critique of the “homogenous time” of the nation-state, in favor of the “heterogeneous time” of the post-colony, is bringing about new scholarship invested in accessing the plural political cultures and “other universals” across postcolonial societies in the Global South, helping to visibilize the ongoing multiracial and religious nature of Africa and the Indian Ocean world. Historian Sugata Bose (2009), for example, suggests that travelers and seafarers propagated Indian Ocean cosmopolitanisms through the expansion of universal ideals via religious beliefs – especially through the trading cultures of diasporic communities of Sunni and Shia Muslims and Hindus. Others are just beginning to explore

the significance of Sikh presence and the Sikh religious tradition in the Indian Ocean world (Roy 2012). In the more romanticized narratives of the Indian Ocean world prior to European colonization, Indian merchants, travelers, migrants, and settlers expand cosmopolitan ideas across time and space via their circular migrations to and from India and East Africa. These knowledge economies encompassed African worlds, traditions, knowledge, and concepts, particularly on the Swahili Coast. They flourished alongside the more linear, progressive temporalities of European modernization and development that led to the eventual formation of the nation and nationalist identities. Spiritual and religious encounters across East Africa and the Indian Ocean world constituted a kind of “hybrid modernity” or “vernacular modernity” (Diouf 2000) that are illegible to us through the secular temporality of the modern nation-state.

New research on Sikhs and the Sikh tradition in Africa might develop an intersectional analysis of race and religion, exploring modern modes of racialization as connected to secularization and religion-making processes. Such research would help to resist the homogenization and minoritization of the Indian/South Asian diaspora in East Africa, exploring the trajectories of specific non-secular spiritual traditions and their relationships to African indigenous spiritualities. Such work also creates space for analyzing not only the political but the ethical subject positions of East African Sikhs, ultimately assisting us in redefining “the political” through non-secular and non-liberal domains (see also Mahmood 2011).

Conclusions and Broader Interventions

Tracing Sikh encounters with Africa and Africans across the eras described previously (imperial/colonial encounters, anticolonial nationalism, postcolonial Sikh racial exclusion, expulsion and exodus, and the contradictory inclusions and exclusions of Sikh diasporic communities in neoliberal East Africa) reveal rich and complex encounters between Sikhs and Africans, both intimacies and estrangements. Yet there is still much more research to be done on the Sikh tradition and Sikh community formation in East Africa. Sikh presence in East Africa showcases the transregional and diasporic resilience of the Sikh tradition, Sikh entanglements with Blackness and with Africans, the development of unique political and ethical subjectivities that mediate both secular and non-secular domains, the formation of new Afro-Sikh and Afro-Asian identities, subjectivities, and communities.

The study of Sikhs and the Sikh tradition in Africa, no doubt, is marginalized in the overarching scholarship that focuses primarily on Indian diaspora and thematic of race, class, nation, and citizenship in East Africa. The study of Sikhs and the Sikh tradition also continues to be marginalized in emerging fields of Global South studies, Indian Ocean studies, and transnational/global Afro-Asian studies. Sikh studies’ ambivalence around its own intra-Sikh “subaltern diasporas” in Africa and the Caribbean, geographic locations that are racialized as Black and therefore shaped through anti-Black racism/anti-Blackness and regarded as Other to modernity, development, and civilization, or as sites of political illiberalism, despotism, and corruption. Centering Sikh encounters with Africa and Africans force us to attend to the ways in which, consciously or unconsciously, both European imperial and colonial epistemologies, white racial supremacy, and Indian Brahminical caste supremacy shape the Sikh diaspora’s encounters with Africans and Blackness and even belie knowledge formations in Sikh studies.

This chapter, however, reveals the deep historical and contemporary engagement between Sikhs and the Sikh tradition and Africa and Africans – one that is essential to understanding relationships between Punjabi Sikhs and the African diaspora across other geographic locations like South Asia, Europe, and North America. Attention to Sikh relationalities with racial Blackness and with

Africans begin in Africa, and they are contiguous with Sikh relationalities with racial Blackness and the African diaspora in other contexts. A stronger focus on Afro-Sikh/Sikh-African encounters allows us to more forthrightly mine the ways in which ideas of race, civilizational, religious, and caste hierarchy are implicated in shaping the content and boundaries of Sikh identity, subjectivity, and community formation, as well as the contours of the Sikh tradition. They allow us to assess the creativity and mobilities of the Sikh tradition as Sikh communities navigate secular liberal, illiberal, and non-liberal political, cultural, and religious formations; navigate political and racial insecurities in Africa; and produce and reproduce intimacies and estrangements with their African counterparts. They also reveal the quotidian and eventful ways in which Sikhs have transgressed race/caste distinctions and patterns of prejudice and discrimination.

Our existing focus on the Sikh tradition and Sikh diasporic subjectivities in Global North, rather than Global South contexts, has limited Sikh studies through a singular focus on Sikh minority identity in liberal multicultural frameworks. Attention to ongoing imperial and neocolonial engagements between the Global North and South, the racialized production of Africa, the production of ideas and categories of liberalism, illiberalism, and non-liberalism, and relationalities between colonized populations, such as African/Afro-Sikhs and indigenous Africans, offer new openings to the field of Sikh studies. Thus, a critical and relevant globally framed Sikh studies encompasses the African continent and African diasporas. It works at the intersection of race, caste, religion, gender, and sexuality, connecting Sikh studies to current debates in the interrelated fields of Global South studies, Indian Ocean studies, and a transnational/global Afro-Asian studies.

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SIKHS IN MAINLAND EUROPE

Eleanor Nesbitt

Introduction

Sikh history in mainland Europe began in the nineteenth century with Sikh princes – Duleep Singh, the deposed maharaja of Punjab, in the 1850s, and Jagatjit Singh, the ruler of the princely state of Kapurthala, in the 1890s. Subsequently, in the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of Sikhs, serving in the British Indian Army, arrived as combatants in Western Europe in two world wars. Smaller numbers of young people from well-to-do families came to study in continental universities. Later, from the 1970s, as migration to the UK became more restricted, more Sikhs made their home in continental Europe. Many arrived as economic migrants from Punjab, but others came as refugees and asylum seekers – first from Uganda when “Asians” were expelled in 1972, then from Punjab from the mid-1980s, and most recently from Afghanistan. Students have continued to arrive, in increasing numbers, and Sikhs are among the sought-after Indian professionals migrating to Europe in the twenty-first century.

This chapter summarizes the early history of contact between Sikhs and mainland Europeans and subsequent Sikh migration to many European countries. It suggests country-specific developments and more general features as well as highlighting the diverse migration trajectories of Europe’s Sikh population. Attention is paid to transnational interactions and to cultural and religious continuities, challenges, and changes as Sikhs adapt to their European context and respond to events such as the fall of the Soviet Union, the expansion of the European Union, and 9/11 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Population

In some European countries, most Indian immigrants are Sikh: for example, an estimated 90% of Greece’s Indian population (Papageorgiou 2011: 203). However, the total number of Sikhs currently residing in mainland Europe is uncertain because of the many undocumented irregular migrants and because of national censuses not asking for respondents’ religion. This situation is changing: when communism in Poland collapsed in 1989, migration became easier, and numbers became easier to estimate (Igielski 2017: 538). Austria’s 2011 census omitted a religion question even though the 2001 census had asked for religious affiliation (Hutter 2017: 452), but in

December 2020, Sikhism was registered as a religion, with the result that Sikhs can use “Singh” and “Kaur” after their first name, can mention Sikhism as their religion on official forms, and register as Sikhs (*Times of India* 2020).

Meanwhile, Portugal’s census category “other non-Christian religion” remains non-religion specific (Lourenço 2017: 540), French law prohibits collecting either ethnic or religious data (Moliner 2017: 489), and “Sweden does not register the population by religion because of the constitutional freedom of religion” (Myrvold 2017: 561). Without national official data, estimates by academics and Sikh organizations are tentative (see Cosemans 2017: 459 on Belgium). Bertolani cites widely varying numbers for Sikhs in Italy, though none as high as the 220,000 stated by Cesaretti (2017), and scholarly estimates for Sikhs in Denmark range from 200 to 4,000 (Ilkjaer 2017: 480).

Sikh population size varies considerably, with an estimated 100 in Iceland (Myrvold 2014: 515), 600 to 700 Sikhs in Finland (Hirvi 2017), and 1,000 in Switzerland (Baumann 2017: 568) but many more in Italy (Kahlon 2021 suggests 80,000). Scholars estimate 35,000 in Germany; 20,000 in Greece; 15,000 in, respectively, the Netherlands, France, and Spain; 5,000 in Norway (Jacobsen 2017: 533) and Portugal (Lourenço 2017: 540); and 4,000 in both Sweden (Myrvold 2017: 561) and Denmark. Regarding Eastern Europe, Myrvold estimated 3,000 in both Poland and European Russia with smaller numbers in Hungary and the Czech Republic (2014: 515), and Tatla suggested a “few hundred” in Ukraine and other former Soviet republics (2014: 499). Altogether there may be fewer than 250,000 Sikhs on the European mainland (Kahlon 2021), about half the number resident in the UK – an increase, however, on Myrvold’s guesstimate of 150,000 to 200,000 (2014: 514).

Sikh communities in Europe are increasing because of further migration, including family reunion – and the arrival of spouses – marriages being one means of migration (see Bertolani 2012 on Italy), plus natural increase through births. Nonetheless, national populations sometimes decrease because Sikhs move across borders – mainly from south to west – in search of better jobs. So since 2005, Sikhs have moved from Portugal to other European countries (Lourenço 2017: 540; McGarrigle and Ascensão 2018). Switzerland’s peak of 3,000 Sikhs in the 1990s dipped to about 1,000 through refusals of refugee status and resultant return to India or onward migration to Canada and elsewhere (Baumann 2017: 568).

Within European countries, Sikh populations are locally concentrated: many of Spain’s Sikhs live in Barcelona, and well over a third of Italy’s Sikhs live in Brescia, Mantua, Bergamo, and Cremona in Lombardy (Bertolani 2017: 513). Most of France’s Punjabi Sikhs have settled in Paris and its northern and eastern suburbs (Moliner 2017: 490). In Germany most Sikhs live in the western part – Cologne, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, and Hamburg especially (Kahlon 2021).

Gurdwaras

One measure of Sikh presence – its size, local concentration, wealth, and confidence – is the increasing number of gurdwaras. In 2019 there were an estimated 137 gurdwaras in continental Europe (Kahlon 2021), but the number is probably higher, given that more than 40 are listed in Italy (Bertolani 2017: 506); 39 in Germany; 22 in Spain (Santos-Fraile 2017: 559), including Madrid, Palma de Mallorca, Murcia, and Valencia as well as Barcelona; and 14 de facto gurdwaras in Greece (including five Ravidasi centers – see next section) (Papageorgiou 2017: 500). Nugteren (2017) describes seven gurdwaras in the Netherlands. The seven in Austria include three in Vienna (Kahlon 2021; *Times of India* 2020). Belgium, Switzerland, and France each have five: France’s first gurdwara opened in the mid-1980s in Bobigny (Moliner 2017: 490). There are two gurdwaras in Denmark (Ilkjaer 2017: 482), two in Norway, and one in, respectively, Finland, Poland (Igielski 2017: 538), Portugal (Jacobsen 2012: 108), Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. Cyprus too has one gurdwara.

Initially, Sikhs worship in rented premises and, later, local communities acquire and modify buildings, often marking them externally with a *nishan sahib* (Sikh pennant). However, even *nishan sahibs* are not allowed in some countries (Kahlon 2021), and in Greece, Sikhs have had to register Indian ethno-cultural associations rather than places of worship (Papageorgiou 2017: 500; Kahlon 2021). One of mainland Europe's first gurdwaras was established in the 1970s in Frankfurt, not by Punjabis, but by German Sikh converts (Myrvold 2014: 518), whereas Italy's first gurdwara opened in 1991 in an abandoned flourmill (Bertolani 2017: 505) and Poland's in 2007 (Igielski 2017: 538).

Increasingly, gurdwaras are purpose-built: in 2006, Switzerland's Langenthal gurdwara opened and, more recently, Gurudwara Sahib Switzerland in Däniken. Based on Indian prototypes, both incorporate decorative elements imported from India or created by local Sikhs (Baumann 2017: 569). Northern Europe's largest purpose-built gurdwara is Gurdwara Shri Guru Nanak Niwas in Lier, Norway (Jacobsen 2017: 533).

The number of gurdwaras in any locality reflects not only population numbers but also factionalism, as congregations splinter along lines of political allegiance (relating to Punjab), religious grouping, caste, leaders' personalities, and other factors. Focusing on Denmark, Ilkjaer conceptualizes "evolving phases of cooperation and conflict" (2017: 482), a description that fits other countries too.

Sources on Sikh-European Interaction

Until the twenty-first-century studies of Europe's Sikh communities, Sikhs had received little attention from mainland European writers. Notably, in 1606, Father Jerome Xavier wrote from Lahore to the Provincial at Goa about Guru Arjan's death; the Swiss soldier-trader Antoine-Louis Henri Polier provided eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century accounts of Sikhs. Baron Charles von Hügel produced a German travelogue, and in the late 1800s, Helena Blavatsky published in Russian about Sikhs.

In the twentieth century, the Breton peasant poet, Anjela Duval, translated Guru Nanak's Arati composition into Breton (Nesbitt 2021) and the French historian of religions, Michel Delahoutre, published a monograph on the Sikhs (1989). Three collections of studies edited by Knut Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold (2011, 2012, 2015) focus on particular aspects of Sikh experience in specific countries.

Sikh soldiers' World War I letters (praising aspects of French life while deploring the weather) are a major source (Omissi 1999, 2012). Letters and diary entries about Sikh combatants in France (majortomswar.com/transcript.asp) underlie Vee Walker's only slightly fictionalized novel (2019). (By contrast, Michael Ondaatje's novel [1992], and the resultant film, feature a fictional Sikh sapper in Italy in World War 2.) Autobiographical writing by second-generation, twenty-first-century Norwegian Sikhs offers a further source (Jacobsen 2018).

Visual sources include an 1887 *Punch* cartoon of Duleep Singh (hoping for Russian help in reclaiming Punjab) dancing to a Russian bear's flute (Bance 2004: 70) and black-and-white photographs of soldiers arriving in France in 1914. The Berlin Sound Archive in Humboldt University holds sound recordings (by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission [UKPHA n.d.]) from the First World War, when 76 Jat Sikh prisoners were the subjects of scientific research projects. A century later, the Internet provides abundant audiovisual material produced about and by European Sikhs.

Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Contact Between Sikhs and Europeans

From 1820, officers from the Napoleonic war helped Maharaja Ranjit Singh modernize his army. He employed French officers (Jean-François Allard and Claude Auguste Court) and Italians (Paolo Crescenzo Martino Avitabile and Jean-Baptiste Ventura) as well as Russian, Polish, Prussian, and

Spanish officers (Roy 2011: 143–144). In 2016, a statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was unveiled in Allard's hometown, St. Tropez (France).

On February 14, 1858, Queen Victoria mentioned her protégé Duleep Singh's visit to Sardinia and Corsica, for some sunshine.¹ In the 1870s, Sikhs were among over 5,500 Indian troops stationed in Malta (see www.facebook.com/watch/?v=592367470956039).

By the 1880s Duleep Singh's relationship with the British government had broken down, and he returned to his Sikh faith. He shifted to France after detention in Aden on his attempt in 1886 to return to India. His friendship with Russians in Paris led to his abortive visit to Russia in 1887. Shortly before his death in Paris in 1893, Duleep Singh received a visit from maharaja Jagatjit Singh, who had already become proficient in French and who emulated French architecture in Kapurthala.

On April 11, 1893, Jagatjit Singh was Queen Victoria's guest in Florence.² In 1906, he visited Madrid for the coronation of King Alfonso and in 1908 married Anita Delgado Briones, a flamenco dancer. In 1915 the couple visited soldiers from Kapurthala serving in France. In 1912, Umrao Singh Shergil Majithia had come to Budapest with his Hungarian wife, Marie Antoinette Gottenberg, the companion in Lahore of Duleep Singh's daughter, Princess Bamba Duleep Singh.

Sikhs in Two World Wars

During the First World War, Umrao Singh sympathized with German conspirators against the British. The British authorities intercepted his letter of support to the Indian leader of the German Afghan army, which was to invade India. However, in 1921, Umrao Singh returned to India, the king having declared an amnesty for political offences.

Similarly, in the Second World War, some Sikhs – prisoners of war and students in Europe – were inspired by Subhas Chandra Bose to fight with Germany against the Allies. They served in the Legion Freies Indien (Free Indian Legion), intending to liberate India from the British. However, although hopes of India's independence from Britain were rising, many more Sikhs enrolled to fight for the Allies. Maharaja Yadavinder Singh of Patiala (subsequently India's ambassador in The Hague) and other Sikh princes contributed thousands of soldiers to the war (Nugteren 2017: 522; Diver 1942: 21). Italy's first Sikhs arrived in World War II (Bertolani 2017: 503).

The first Sikhs in Belgium, France, Germany, and Greece, however, were soldiers in World War I. Alongside Indian soldiers from other communities, three all-Sikh battalions fought in France: the 47th Sikhs and the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs each comprised eight companies of Jat Sikhs, while Sikh soldiers of lower caste served in the 34th Sikh Pioneers (Omissi 2012: 39). Even before their arrival in France, in autumn 1914, two Sikh companies of the 57th Rifles had arrived. In March 1915, 80% of the 47th Sikhs were killed in the Allied attack on German positions around Neuve Chapelle, and the battalion soon sustained similarly heavy losses at Ypres/Ieper (Omissi 2012: 41).

It is impossible to know how many Sikhs fought in Europe, but many of the estimated 83,000 Sikhs who died in the two world wars (Myrvold 2014: 514) were killed in Europe, and many more were wounded. Sikh combatants were interred (mostly unnamed) in war cemeteries, and some were named on memorials in Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, and Romania (Kahlon 2021).

Students

Between the world wars, wealthy Sikhs came to mainland Europe, especially Germany, for higher education (Kahlon 2021). After the Second World War, between 1950 and 1985, intergovernmental exchange programs enabled Indian students to study in Moscow, Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), and other places in the Soviet Union (Bochkovskaya 2017: 546). There are currently Sikh students in

many European universities – Poland, for example, is popular as a relatively inexpensive destination (Igielski 2017: 538).

Late-Twentieth-Century Migration

Sikh migrants to mainland Europe from the 1960s were mostly 20- to 40-year-old men who left Punjab for economic reasons. Contributory factors included families' dislocation by Partition in 1947, the diminishing acreage of landholdings because of subdivision among sons, the poor conditions for agricultural laborers, and the pressure to maintain family honor (*izzat*) by, for example, providing for sisters' marriages. As restrictions on immigration to the UK, the preferred destination, increased from 1962, Sikhs came to France, Belgium, Germany, and other countries as intended transit points (Myrvold 2014: 516), expecting mainland Europe to be a temporary stage in their migration to the UK or North America.

Sikh migration to Spain, Italy, and Portugal began later, with settlement in Portugal only starting in 1990 (Lourenço 2017: 540), and Afghan Sikhs' major migration to Europe occurred in the early 1990s.

Persecution of Asians in East Africa caused them to immigrate, often to the UK. Following the expulsion of Uganda's Asians in 1972, some came to Sweden (Myrvold 2017: 562) and other European countries. Escalating tensions and violence in Punjab, climaxing in 1984 in the Indian army's assault on the Golden Temple complex, the killing of many Sikhs in Delhi, following Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, resulted in Sikhs fleeing, in the 1980s and 1990s, to Nordic countries (Myrvold 2014: 516; 2017: 562), Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Especially after 1984, relatively affluent Sikhs came from Afghanistan to Germany, Russia, and Sweden to escape the political instability; then, after the collapse of Mohammad Najibullah's government in 1992 and the overthrow of the Taliban regime following the invasion of American troops in 2001, less-well-to-do Afghan Sikhs and Hindus arrived. Having fled to India on mass visas, they came to Russia (Bochkovskaya 2017: 547), Germany, and the Netherlands – Hutter estimated 7,000 to 10,000 Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in Germany (2017: 495). Applying for refugee status allowed illegal immigrants to legalize their status in Poland (Igielski 2017: 538) and elsewhere. In France, in addition to applications for political asylum, some Sikhs applied for one-year renewable permits for those with life-threatening illness who were ineligible for adequate treatment in their home country (Kahlon 2021). New primary migration to Northern and Western Europe continues for students and professional workers in IT, telecommunications, and health care (Myrvold 2014: 516). Indeed, in 2000, the German chancellor announced a green card for IT specialists (Kahlon 2021).

Italy, the mainland European country with the highest number of Sikhs, became an attractive option as Italian regulations allowed the immigration of circus personnel. Moreover, there were employment possibilities as truck drivers and traders and, in the dairy industry, as milkers and producers of parmesan and other cheeses – now almost a Sikh monopoly. Residency was more easily obtainable in southern European countries, though wages were lower than in northern countries.

The ending of the Cold War, with the fall of the Soviet Union, facilitated Sikh migration as new routes opened (see Thandi 2012: 14–17). In addition to a route via north Africa's Spanish territories, Ceuta and Melilla, there was a Baltic route (involving Finland and Sweden) and Eastern routes (Poland). Another popular route was via Turkey into Greece. Afghan Sikhs and Hindus got to Russia via Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan (Bochkovskaya 2017: 547), with Afghan migrants benefiting from visa-free entry to Russia (before 2015) for residents of former Soviet states.

Other political and economic developments that facilitated Sikhs' migration were the expansion of the European Union and development of the Schengen Area (Myrvold 2014: 516), plus periods during which Greece, Italy, and Spain offered an amnesty or at least opportunities for regularizing illegal migrants' status (Thandi 2012: 14). Across Europe, thanks to people traffickers, there are significant numbers of illegal migrants.

Individuals' transnationalism often involves acquiring citizenship in one European country but integrating in another while working strategically towards settling in yet another (McGarrigle and Ascensão 2018). Because the migrants' destinations of choice, the UK and other Anglophone countries, were tightening their entry requirements, Sikhs often had to remain in countries such as Spain (Lum 2011: 181).

Education and Employment

Sikh children attend local schools and universities, so moving into employment of higher professional standing than their parents. First-generation Sikh migrants worked as taxi drivers, factory hands, retailers, and peddlers: in Spain and Portugal they worked in catering and construction and, in Greece, in the fisheries as well as agriculture and agro-processing (Myrvold 2014: 518). In Finland, Sikhs initially found jobs in restaurants and moved from cleaning and serving to proprietorship (Hirvi 2011). Similarly, Sikh migrants to Belgium in the 1980s worked as seasonal fruit farm workers but now have more settled jobs (Cosemans 2017: 458), and in Italy, younger Sikhs are leaving dairy work for urban employment.

The Diversity of European Sikhs

In addition to their educational and socioeconomic diversity, Europe's South Asian (nearly 100% Punjabi) Sikhs have migrated from different countries – Uganda and Afghanistan as well as, most generally, northern India. Outside the UK, the biggest Afghan Sikh community is in Germany, followed by Belgium (Inderjeet Singh oral communication March 27, 2021).

France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have small minorities of “*gora*” (white) Sikhs: most Sikhs in southern France are converts attracted by the teaching of Harbhajan Singh Puri (Yogi Bhajan) to his Healthy Happy Holy Organization (3HO) and Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere (a.k.a. Sikh Dharma International). 3HO in Italy began in 1970, and there are centers in Bologna and Rome (Bertolani 2017: 506–507). A Poland-based American Sikh, Bhupinder Singh Tufaan-Nihang, described (in Lapland) his transformative religious experience in Darbar Sahib (the Golden Temple, Amritsar) (Kiviluoma 2015).

Caste, too, differentiates Sikhs. Jats' tendency to regard Lubanas and Ravidasis as inferior results in these communities establishing separate gurdwaras (Moliner 2011, 2017: 489), such as Gurdwara Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha in La Corneuve and Gurdwara Baba Makhan Shah Lubana in le Bourget (Kahlon 2021). In Germany too there has been intercaste tension (Stephanus 2017: 497). Barcelona has an established Ravidasi community (Lum 2010, 2011: 184), and there are over 20 local Ravidasi communities across Italy (Bertolani 2017: 506).

In Vienna, in the Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, in May 2009, six Sikhs fatally shot Sant Ramchand and seriously injured Sant Niranjana Das, the head of Ravidasis' religious center, Dera Sachkhand Ballan, in Punjab. While any display of reverence to a spiritual master in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is regarded by Sikhs more generally as disrespectful, the Vienna attack was widely perceived as caste-based, as there is a long history in Punjab of tension between the Jat

(peasant farmer) community and the (landless) Ravidasis, stigmatized by occupations historically as skinners and tanners.

The Vienna attack arguably birthed a new Ravidasi religion (Lum 2011: 195). In Italy, Ravidasis divided over whether to remove the *Guru Granth Sahib* from their religious centers and to strive for recognition as a separate religion (Bertolani 2017: 506), and Greece's five Ravidasi congregations stem from the "Vienna incident" (Papageorgiou 2017: 500). By contrast, members of groups, such as 3HO, regard themselves as unambiguously Sikh. This is the case too with the Namdharis who (controversially) venerate a succession of living Gurus. Some Namdharis live near Mantua in Italy (Bertolani 2017: 506), and Italy is also home to a few members of groups more loosely related to Sikhism: Balmikis and Radhasoamis (Ibid.).

Europe's Sikhs differ in their politics, notably regarding Sikh separatism in Punjab. Thus, in Denmark and Norway, conflicts surfaced between Khalistanis and non-Khalistanis (Myrvold 2014: 217), and in Switzerland, Sikhs in Langenthal support Khalistan, whereas political propaganda is rejected by Sikhs in Däniken (Baumann 2017: 570).

Sikhs' gender and generation too – intersecting with their locations in Europe and migration histories – differentiate their experience. In southern Europe, Sikh women are outnumbered by men and tend to be housewives (Myrvold 2014: 518 citing Bertolani 2012 and Lum 2012). By contrast, most females in Nordic countries go out to work. Across Europe, younger Sikhs, educated in Europe, confidently speak their local language and, often, English. While Gurmukhi will be taught to successive generations, their active use of Punjabi, and in the case of Afghan Sikhs, fluency in Hindko, Dari, and Pashto, declines. Whilst being more distanced from Punjabi culture, Sikhs raised in Europe often seek out Sikh religious tradition.

Meanwhile, increasingly, families are "mixed-faith" because of Sikhs marrying out, so blurring inter-community boundaries. In other respects too, boundaries are blurred. For example, in Poland the gurdwara congregation includes Sindhi Hindus whose religious practice entails devotion to Guru Nanak.

Law/Symbols

Especially since 9/11, turban-wearing Sikhs in Europe have experienced discrimination, including at border controls. In 2011 a well-known Indian golf trainer was required to remove his turban in public at an Italian airport, and the hydrogeologist Shaminder Puri lost his legal challenge to the Polish airport authorities over his repeatedly being required to remove his turban (www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-oxfordshire-16318914). In 2019 the acclaimed humanitarian Ravi Singh's turban was insulted by a staff member in Vienna airport (Mathur 2019). Similar incidents have been reported in Spanish and Italian airports. Subsequently Italian airport authorities adopted the UK protocol. Moreover, Italian Sikhs are now permitted to have ID photos taken wearing their turban (Kahlon 2021), and in 2020, after a six-year campaign, Norwegian Sikhs could have passport photos that did not show their ears (a requirement incompatible with an appropriately tied turban) (sikhpa.com/Sikhs-overturn-norwegian-passport-ruling). Nordic countries and Austria now allow turban-wearing Sikhs to serve in their armies (Kahlon 2021).

In 2004 a French law banned religious symbols in state schools, including turbans and *patkas*. In 2018, when France's president Macron visited India, the Conseil Représentatif des Sikhs de France wrote to India's External Affairs Minister saying that Sikhs were still required to remove their turbans for official photographs on driving licenses and bus passes. This discrimination continued despite the United Nations' Human Rights Committee's 2012 ruling that turbans posed no security risk.

The *kirpan* (sword) too met legal challenges: in 2006, a court confirmed Denmark's ban on Sikhs carrying a ceremonial knife (Kahlon 2021), and in 2017 the Italian Supreme Court stated that public safety superseded individual rights (BBC 2017). However, under Swiss law a *kirpan* is not technically a weapon as its blade is asymmetrical, there is no automatic switching mechanism, and it is not a throwing knife (www.swissinfo.ch/eng/minority-report_how-the-sikhs-integrated-in-switzerland/45064178).

Transnational Connectedness

European Sikhs are connected by family ties and in numerous other ways with Punjab and with Sikhs in other countries, especially the UK, as well as other European countries and North America. Their remittances provide financial support for relatives in Punjab. Sikhs return for marriages and to scatter the ashes of the deceased – some countries' hygiene laws forbid scattering in local rivers (Kahlon 2021). Events in Europe have repercussions elsewhere: riots erupted in Punjab following the Vienna incident in 2009, and prominent Sikh groups in the US called for the violence to end (Barrier 2011: 37). Conversely, occurrences outside Europe impact on Europe's Sikhs: the events of 1984 in Punjab and Delhi worsened relations between Hindus and Sikhs, and 9/11 increased suspicion of turban-wearing Sikhs who were mistaken for Islamist extremists.

Social media connect Sikhs transnationally, and UK-based Sikh television channels, such as Sikh Channel, Sangat TV, and Akaal Channel, broadcast devotional, political, and social content across mainland Europe (Thandi 2012: 11, 16). Mainland Sikh congregations host preachers from India and the UK. The Akhand Kirtani Jatha (which owes its distinctive discipline to Bhai Randhir Singh) has held *rainsabais* (all-night devotional sessions) in Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Italy (Singh 2012: 172). Chalda Vaheer Jatha (led by Bhai Rajinder Singh of Dudley, post 1984) was a group of *kirtanis* (musician-preachers) that traveled to Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. UK Sikhs have been involved in teaching in Sikhi Camps in France, Sweden, Norway, Germany (Singh 2012: 171), and in Vienna, Bobigny, and Rotterdam (Kahlon 2021). In 2004 Sikhs from Ilford brought a copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* to Sikhs in Cyprus (Kemble 2014).

In addition to helping support the (less established) communities in other European countries, UK Sikhs visit war memorials and cemeteries in France and Belgium. As “destination weddings” become increasingly popular, some British Sikh couples opt to marry in attractive continental venues, with Portugal and Croatia providing favored settings and facilities (Croatia Week 2018).

Transmission, Socialization, Change, and Continuity

European Sikhs' perpetuation and adaptation of tradition and their adoption of European norms exemplify the dynamic tension between *panjabiat* (Punjabi emphases and behavior), *sikhi* (the insights of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and injunctions of Sikh codes of discipline), and modernity (Nesbitt 2011). These pulls and pressures are experienced differently by the Punjabi-speaking first generation, struggling to survive and keen to maintain links with Punjab, and by generations that have grown up in Europe, who question Punjabi attitudes and expectations but may, simultaneously, be curious about their ancestral religion. In some respects (for example, their emphasis on equality), modernity and Sikh religious teaching are mutually reinforcing; in other ways, modernity and *panjabiat* converge – in, for example, some visible consumerism. For young women the tension between modernity (especially regarding dress and the freedom to go out or to date) and Punjabi norms is more acute than for young men.

Sikhs growing up in Europe identify Punjabi as their “mother tongue” even if they are more fluent in the local language, as Myrvold found in Sweden (2015). In some cases, they had attended Punjabi classes provided by their school. Gurdwaras too may offer classes in Punjabi and in *gatka* (a martial art), *kirtan* (devotional music), and Gurmat (religious teaching). The Internet is a major resource for both parents and children for exploring Sikh heritage, augmented by the *sikhi* camps that some attend.

Sikhs’ religious customs have adapted to the European context: the largest *sangats* assemble (like Christian congregations) on Sundays, and festivals are celebrated on the Sunday following the actual date. In Finland the gurdwara operates on Sunday afternoons because of “late night timings of Sikh establishments of bars, discotheques etc.” (Kahlon 2021). Weddings and funerals have adapted to local legal requirements: in Sweden a Christian priest conducts a short ceremony to legalize Sikhs’ marriage, and cremations are carried out in rooms supervised by Church of Sweden and funeral directors (Myrvold 2017: 566). Divorces are increasing.

Some changes relate to running gurdwaras – some European gurdwaras cannot afford to employ a *granthi*: in one Stockholm gurdwara, therefore, all members have a key, and families take turns in performing essential functions (Kahlon 2021).

In order to represent Sikh interests, national organizations have formed such as “The Council of Sikhs” and “Sikh de France” in France (Kahlon 2021). Realizing the importance of educating the public about Sikhs’ religion and culture, Italian Sikhs have prepared and distributed literature in Italian. Norwegian Sikhs organize turban days near April 13, when everyone can try wearing a turban and receive information about Sikhism. In some countries, too, an annual *nagar kirtan* (procession, with the *Guru Granth Sahib* borne through the streets on a decorated vehicle) not only celebrates a festival such as *Vaisakhi* or Guru Nanak’s birthday, but also publicizes Sikhism.

Sikhs’ profile has been raised by conspicuous *seva* (voluntary service). Sometimes this is a large-scale *langar* (preparation and serving of vegetarian meals). One prominent example was the *langar* provided for the fourth Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in Barcelona in 2004 (Kahlon 2021). The UK-based organization Khalsa Aid helped flood victims in Bosnia in 2014, and on the coast of Greece in 2016, they assisted Middle Eastern refugees. Local Sikhs’ *seva* has included humanitarian service in Paris and Brussels after attacks by Islamists in 2015 and 2016 (Kahlon 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic saw Sikhs delivering food to quarantined Indians in Portugal (Sibal 2020).

Notes

1 RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ (W) February 14, 1858 (Princess Beatrice’s copies). Retrieved July 16 2020.

2 RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ (W) April 11, 1893 (Princess Beatrice’s copies). Retrieved July 13 2020.

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15

SIKHS IN BRITAIN

A Community in Transition

Gurharpal Singh

Introduction

The UK Census 2021 was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the religious population of the country was published in November 2022. The data show a major transformation in the social composition of the British Sikh community with its size increasing from 432,000 (2011) to 520,000. This increase has occurred against the background of globalization of the 2000s, when “Cool Britannia” became the icon of cosmopolitanism only to be followed a decade later by the rise of English nationalism and withdrawal from the European Union. As Britain searches for a new role in a post-globalized, post-pandemic world, British Sikhs, who have established a unique position within the British state as a “favored” minority, have once again become highly “venerable,” who have to struggle to maintain their cultural and political rights. This struggle in the next decade is likely to be much more difficult than in the past because social and political fragmentation among Sikhs is likely to make the exercise difficult.

The history of Sikh settlement in Britain spans three centuries (Singh and Tatla 2006: 22–68). The narrative begins with the arrival of Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1854 and the presence before 1945 of princes, students, soldiers, and sojourners. While most returned to India, recent research has focused on the settlers who established communities in the industrial heartlands in the Midlands and the North. Singh (2017) provides a moving account of a pre-1945 migrant from the Doaba who settled in Coventry. His journey via a spell in Kenya and then through France reveals how the Sikh migrants found new opportunities for migration as immigration controls in the USA and Canada after 1918 choked off the primary settlement of Sikhs. Many, especially from the Doaba, headed for South America, and others were recruited into the railway building program in France. From France, most moved to Britain, where they were the pioneers of organizations such as the Indian Workers’ Association that would dominate the community’s life for several decades. In 1951 there were less than 7,000 Sikhs in Britain. Most lived in isolated communities, with one major gurdwara, Shepard’s Bush, in London (Singh and Tatla 2006: 59).

Post-1945, there were three waves of Sikh migration. Firstly, after the war, the reconstruction of the British economy led to a major labor shortage that was filled by recruiting industrial workers from the New Commonwealth countries in South Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. This was followed in the 1960s by family reunions and further migration from East Africa as a result of

Africanization policies that saw the movements of Indians from these states to the West. Secondly, post-1984, a significant number of Sikhs from India and elsewhere entered Britain as asylum seekers, and though initially their numbers were not large, through primary migration, they were able to establish a significant presence in the social and political life of the community. Thirdly, the globalization of the British economy from the early 1990s, the lifting of restrictions on European Union citizens settling in Britain, and the largely scale recruitment of students from South Asia have contributed to a major increase in the size and profile of the community. These flows have been added to by those seeking asylum, particularly from Afghanistan, and illegal arrivals through cross-channel routes.

Geographically, there are Sikh settlements in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, but the vast majority are based in England and concentrated in few localities such as West, South and East London, the West Midlands, East Midlands, and Yorkshire. Here they have created “Little Punjabs,” like Southall, in inner-city areas left largely undeveloped by local authorities with poor facilities and terraced housing dating from the industrial revolution. These localities are celebrated as examples of “multicultural Britain.” In reality, however, as research has demonstrated (LSE 2011), such characterizations are a negative defense mechanism for non-white British than an acceptance by the white population of ideological multiculturalism. These localities resemble “soft” or “performative” multiculturalism that is high on symbolism but devoid of ideological or legal commitment (Singh and Tatla, 143). Nonetheless, the Sikh community has constructed a rich, vibrant, and dynamic cultural life centered around urban ethnic economies and religious institutions. Over 300 gurdwaras represent all shades of social diversity within the *Panth* with many as outstanding examples of urban and Sikh architecture – the new cathedrals of socially diverse Britain (Peach and Gale 2003). For example, the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Southall, was designed by the Architect Co-Partnership and in 2003 at the cost of £17m. It remains the iconic building representing the community in Britain. In the last decade many more have been added in other cities as new styles, functions, and community engagement is reimagined. Gurdwaras, like temples and mosques, are at the center of urban renewal in the long-neglected inner cities of Britain. Whether they will be able to sustain this function in light of Brexit and the challenges of the post-COVID-19 economy is much more doubtful.

Social Change

In 2001, most postwar Sikh settlers in Britain were classified as either 2 or 3 generation, a change reflected in the UK Census 2001 data on Sikhs. For the first time, the majority, 56.1%, were British-born, and though their family size was larger than the national average, it was not significantly so, being the result of the younger age profile. In education, the community increasingly reflected the national profile with minor variation in males and females, though among both there was a significant proportion (20–25%) who left school without any qualifications (Tatla and Singh 2006: 158). In terms of employment, there was a slight underrepresentation below the national average in the tertiary sector but overrepresentation in manufacturing and services. Interestingly in the latter, rates of female employment in the public sector and banking and finance were higher than males (Ibid., 161). One of the striking social statistics that distinguished the community was the high rates of private homeownership (82%), higher than Jews (77%) or Hindus (74%) (Ibid., 67). Ethnically, 96.1% identified themselves as Asian or Asian British, 2% as White, 0.7% as Chinese or other, and 0.19% as Black or Black British (Ibid., 65). Thus, with some notable variations, the picture that emerged with the UK Census 2001 was one of a community beginning to resemble the national

social profile, of making significant progress from lowly beginnings as manual workers mostly without formal post-school education or technical skills.

However, against this general trend, a significant section of the community, perhaps as much as a third, or 40%, did not share in the achievements of the British-born. This proportion struggled to perform in the education and labor markets, was residentially concentrated in the “Little Punjabs,” and suffered significant socioeconomic disadvantage marked by unemployment, dependency, and ill-health. Made up of the residual industrial working class and new migrants from the Punjab, its political and social worldview was best typified by the readers of *Des Pardes* (Punjabi weekly published from Southall), who have provided the community’s leadership and remain sensitive to developments from the Punjab (Ibid., 145–164, 215–216). Their institutional control of gurdwaras gave them access to exceptional resources to perpetuate what Ballard called “backward integration” (2003), as “‘primitive’ people positioned within modernity” (Axel 2001: 7), whose ideals and values had changed little, if at all, from the mid-twentieth-century Punjabi village, thereby placing them at odds with Punjab society in India itself and the emerging culture of young British Sikhs.

In the last two decades, the secular trend for the British-born to predominate appears to have been reversed. This surprising fact emerged in the UK Census 2011, and it is likely to be confirmed in 2021. The major reason for this change was the liberal immigration policy of the Labour governments (1997–2010), which embraced globalization with the accompanying demand for labor – skilled and unskilled – and a large increase in the foreign student population. Alongside these measures, the removal of internal controls within the European Union on the free movement of citizens created new routes of legal and illegal migration. Sikh communities in Greece, Italy, and Spain have established strong transnational links in Britain underpinned by marriage, business, and family networks. The area of Handsworth in Birmingham, for example, for decades the primary site of British Sikhs, is gradually being supplanted by Italian Sikhs, who have relocated in Britain in large numbers following the government’s decision to grant the right of settlement to European citizens before Brexit was finalized in 2021. Similarly, the liberal approach to asylum of the Labour government resulted in a large influx of Afghan Sikhs, who now control the commercial life of Southall’s Broadway.

As well as formal migration, there has been a substantial increase in informal arrivals. In 2006 we estimated that there were 40,000–50,000 illegal Sikh migrants (Singh and Tatla 2006: 60). That figure now is at least doubled, if not exceeds this total. Evidence for this is based on the claims of some Sikh organizations and local surveys as well as the infamous cases of people smuggling such as the one in which 35 Afghan Sikh men, women, and children were found in a shipping container in Essex (BBC News 2014). In addition to these are those who have overstayed their visitor visas, students who have not returned after full-time education. The precarious existence of these informal migrants was dramatically demonstrated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2020–2021, when many were unable to provide for their daily needs or access emergency health care for fear of deportation. In cities like Leicester, it became clear that large sectors of the inner-city economy were dependent on these informal workers who became victims of the COVID-19 virus because of their precarious status (O’Connor 2020; BBC News 2020).

If the projections suggested earlier are indeed correct, then the social picture that emerges of the British Sikh community today is much more variegated than in 2001. Broadly speaking it is likely to have three major categories. First, the British-born, whose social profile matches, if not exceeds, the national average in terms of employment and education. Among this group, there are likely to be high rates of professionalization and wealth accumulation alongside social fragmentation such as lone households, community-out marriages and nationally average divorce rates. Second,

the traditional Indian-born are likely to persist, replenished with new arrivals and through primary migration of spouses. Their numbers increased in 2011, and if this trend is sustained in the last decade, it will have major ramifications for the community in the next decade. Third, the size of the informal Sikh community in Britain is likely to grow substantially. For obvious reasons, this group remains unrepresented, but because of family and economic ties with the Indian-born, it can make its presence felt.

Accordingly, the articulation of British Sikh identity in the next decade is likely to face more stern challenges than in the 50 years before 2001. These challenges arise not only because the political framework within which the Sikhs existed has been recast but also because of increasing social fragmentation and disassociation within the community. These dilemmas are reflected in the political leadership of the community.

Political Leadership and Contemporary Britain

Unlike Canada, Britain does not have a legal commitment to multiculturalism – the recognition and respect for difference in public spaces with equality of opportunity in employment and service delivery in public and private sectors. After the Second World War, the initial approach to the settlement of New Commonwealth immigrants was assimilation into the cultural values of the dominant white *ethnie*. But in response to the growing popular racism in the 1960s, the liberal Labour Party home secretary, Roy Jenkins, outlined the credo of British multiculturalism as not a “flattening process of uniformity but cultural diversity coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (quoted in Rex 2004: 39). Read otherwise, this was integration with equality of opportunity.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, with the aberration of the Conservative government under Margret Thatcher and John Major (1979–1997), the main emphasis of the British state in dealing with social and cultural diversity has been to use equalities legislation. When policy makers refer to multiculturalism, they often unconsciously conflate it with “demographic multiculturalism” or equality of opportunity – for example, policies intended to outlaw racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination. Moreover, British statecraft qualifies this peculiar version of multiculturalism with a high degree of voluntarism and localism: equalities legislation is nationally valid, with some variations in the devolved nations of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, but the political commitment to “ideological multiculturalism” is largely contingent on the strength of local political coalitions that support the policy.

Historically within this framework, the Sikh community has been able to secure exemptions from general legislation when it impacts on its dress code – turbans, beards, kirpans, and karas – because of its political strength in some constituencies, support from the military establishment, and patronage of the British monarchy. In doing so, it has pioneered British multiculturalism by successfully ensuring that equality of opportunity is *subject* dependent. This success has led prime ministers and members of the monarchy to regularly appropriate Sikh values and British values, to a greater popular acceptance of Sikhs in British society. Yet this achievement remains tenuous: it has not led to deep multiculturalism as the episode around the closure of the play *Behzti* in Birmingham (2004) demonstrated. Sikh values can often be traduced in public discourse as foreign, medieval, or fundamentalist (Singh 2005).

These weak foundations of British multiculturalism were demonstrated after 9/11 and the London bombings in July 2005. Prime Minister Tony Blair proclaimed that the “rule of the game have changed and are changing.” The Conservative prime minister David Cameron (2010–2016) promised an “end to state multiculturalism,” and following Britain’s withdrawal from the European

Union (2016) and a wave of terror attacks by the Islamic State in London (2017), the election of Boris Johnson marked the death knell of official support for cultural autonomy. Since 9/11 some religious minorities, like the Muslims, and to lesser extent the Sikhs, have been subject to greater securitization, with interventionist and integrationist programs, like the Prevent Strategy, designed to thwart radicalization (Singh 2020). Today, integration rather than cultural autonomy or an “atmosphere of mutual tolerance” now drives the British state’s policy towards religious and cultural minorities.

Sikh political formations thus operate within an environment that has radically changed. While Sikh voters continue to vote overwhelmingly for the Labour Party, other parties are making inroads into this support, and the community’s political leadership reflects the social and political changes within contemporary Britain. The single-issue mobilization model that so defined the British Sikhs – over racism, immigration issues, turbans, and Khalistan – is being displaced by the community and general interests. This pattern reflects the reality that Sikh identity issues no longer have the resonance that they once did while the representation of Sikh interests is merging with broader interests of equality, disadvantage, and property-owning citizenry.

In the absence of an overall body, the mainstream representation of Sikh interests is undertaken by the British Sikh Consultative Forum, the Network of Sikh Organisations, the Sikh Human Rights Group, the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, and the Sikh Federation (UK). These organizations have some degree of support beyond their locality but do not command general legitimacy within the community. The intense rivalry between them for “who represents the Sikhs” militates against the establishment of an institutional hierarchy, enabling the British state to produce policy outcomes consistent with its interests. Thus, the innate pluralism of Sikh representation buttresses pragmatic British statecraft that manages the community by encouraging the evolution of “moderate” leadership while marginalizing “radicals” like the Sikh Federation (UK).

The legacy of the Khalistan movement of the 1980s and 1990s retains substantial support among organizations such as the Sikh Federation (UK) and a penumbra of shadowy organizations, many of which function only on the Internet, who are engaged in efforts to promote militancy or socially police the community. The Sikh Federation (UK) was established in 2003 following 9/11 and the ban on its processor (the International Sikh Youth Federation). It has attempted to steal the march on its rivals by reinventing the Khalistan agenda around issues of victimhood, underrepresentation, and discrimination. The party’s program claims that its aims include “giving Sikhs a stronger political voice by taking an increasing interest in mainstream politics in the UK,” but this goal is soon qualified by the need to

argue the case for the Sikhs’ right to self-determination and lobbying . . . the UK government, official representatives of foreign governments in the UK, the European Parliament and . . . the United Nations for the establishment of an independent sovereign Sikh state of Khalistan.

(Singh and Tatla 2006: 131)

In the last 18 years, the Sikh Federation (UK) has led some high-octane campaigns against human rights abuses in Punjab, overturned the legal ban on the International Sikh Youth Federation, and campaigned consistently for Sikh ethnicity to be recognized as a distinct category in UK Census 2021. Apart from localized support in Wolverhampton and west London, the organization has a limited following within gurdwaras in other localities.

Other militant modes of political and religious activism in the last decade have been aimed at redefining community behavior (Singh 2020). The campaign for respect for the *Guru Granth Sahib*

was sought to eradicate the use of the holy scriptures in public places, such as marriage halls, which also served as venues for the consumption of intoxicants. Similarly, well-organized groups have regularly disrupted interfaith marriages in gurdwara on the ground that they are prohibited by the *Sikh Rehat Maryada*. This has led to high-profile cases of marriage disruption with some gurdwaras now organizing additional security to forestall such events. And in some localities, against the national stories of male Muslims of Pakistani heritage grooming socially venerable teenage British females, a moral panic has emerged about the Muslim grooming of Sikh girls (Singh 2010). These forms of activism are important insofar as they are aimed at defending a neo-orthodox British Sikh identity while also constructing “others” within the familiar tropes as hostile to the community. In some measure, it is reasonable to suggest that these responses represent a denial of the new social reality marked by rising out-marriages, social fragmentation, and increasing drug consumption among the youth that does not conform easily with the ideal British Sikh identity.

The third form of political representation is articulated by elected members of Parliament (MPs) and those appointed in the House Lords. In contrast to Canada, which has a similar population, political representation among Sikhs in Parliament has been slow to emerge. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, two Sikh MPs, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, the turban-wearing Sikh MP (Slough), and Preet Kaur Gill (Edgbaston) were elected. This number compares with 20 in Canada in 2015. British MPs are supplemented by several nominated members in the House of Lords of whom Indrajit Singh of the Network of Sikh organizations is the most prominent. Parliamentarians have established several cross-party groups to promote Sikhs interests, and most recently they were able to exercise considerable influence in organizing a debate in the House of Commons on the farmers’ agitation and the detention of Jatar Singh Johal in the Punjab. Their ability to present a common front however has been severely compromised by internal differences, not least the efforts to dislodge Indrajit Singh as the establishment’s Sikh spokesman (House of Lords 2021).

Fourth, the last decade has seen the emergence of professional groups that aim to influence policy makers by research and lobbying. City Sikhs are an organization of professionals working mainly in London who have come together to promote common Sikh interests. The Sikh Press Council has set itself up as a regulatory authority to monitor press stories on Sikhs, though its credentials to do so are very doubtful. Another organization of professional Sikhs regularly launches the British Sikh Report in Parliament. The report is intended to be the state of the community, but its use of survey data is highly limited, casting doubts over its claims and findings. And finally, the Sikh Council (UK) claims to be “the largest representative platform of Sikh gurdwara organisations in the United Kingdom” (Sikh Council UK, n.d.). The organization emerged from Internet-led campaigns, while its constituency appears not to include some of the leading gurdwaras.

These four modes of representation reflect the changes in the political activity and the social structure of the Sikh community itself. Issues of identity politics now compete with class as well as other interests that both intersect and transcend merely community interests. In this plural political universe, the challenges ahead in the next decade appear formidable.

British Sikhs and the Next Decade

Foremost among these challenges will be how to address the increasing social diversity and fragmentation within the community. The familiar sense of a relatively cohesive community is likely to be displaced by one that is more divided, more polarized, and more uncertain of its place in British society than ever before. Simultaneously, if the trend in the growth of the Indian-born persists, it will represent a major structural change with profound implications for its political and religious outlook because the Indian-born Sikhs tend to be much more socially conservative and more preoccupied

with homeland politics. As we saw during the Khalistan movement in the 1980s and 1990s, they were – and remain – the gatekeepers of community institutions such as gurdwaras and are inclined to foster “backward integration” rather than the secular developments that would further strengthen the integration of Sikhs in British Sikh society. Moreover, such a development is likely to reinforce the poor record of the British Sikhs to build civic associations beyond the gurdwaras. Although the last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of Sikhs schools, heritage associations, women’s groups, and groups contesting dominant narratives of Sikh sexualities, independent institutions that command widespread community support are largely absent. Indeed, in contrast to the USA and Canada, British Sikhs seem highly impoverished in institution building. As a result, most aspects of community life are politicized or riven with factional rivalries – a trend that is likely to be heightened by the predominance of the Indian-born whose experience of factional social and political life in the Punjab often tends to be reproduced in Britain (Singh and Tatla 2006: 216–217).

As the size of the Sikh community in Britain increases substantially, homeland issues will inevitably become much more prominent. Despite the pressure of the British state on social integration in the last two decades, Sikh organizations have kept alive homeland issues such as the abuse of human rights and, more recently, the farmers’ agitation in the Punjab. The economic and social crisis in the Punjab that is the source of much overseas migration today is unlikely to diminish in the short term and might well mature into a confrontation between the Centre and Congress and Akali political leadership (Singh and Shani 2022). Such a regional crisis could easily be transformed into a critical event like 1984 with devastating consequences for the community in Britain and the diaspora. While these tensions so far have been contained, they could rekindle agitational politics. The next Punjab Legislative Assembly elections (March 2022) could well be a key landmark.

Britain maintains a close relationship with the Indian state, a relationship that has been renewed considering post-Brexit and post-pandemic foreign policy tilt towards the Far East in which India is viewed as a strategic economic partner as well as a bulwark against China. For the British state, therefore, trade and security override human rights or the rights of religious minorities in India, even though Indian democracy is taking a dramatic autocratic turn under the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While the government of India has consistently pressured the British government to proscribe the activities of British Sikh militants, the latter’s policy is to tolerate dissent alongside securitization that ensures the primacy of British state interests. There is no indication that this approach has changed under Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Indeed, the recent responses of the British government to the campaign to release Jagtar Singh, the farmers’ agitation, and the vetoing of a nomination to the House of Lords of a supporter of the Sikh Federation (UK) all demonstrate that there are red lines that British policy makers will not cross.

Any resurgence of homeland politics therefore will have to overcome considerable hurdles. These will include not only the opposition of the British state but also increasing fractures within the British Sikh community, which makes general mobilizations much more onerous. In addition to these considerations, it is important to remember that since the formation of the BJP government a charm initiative has been launched to open a dialogue with the Sikh diaspora with the leadership of such organizations as the Sikh Human Rights Group acting as interlocutors with the government of India. These initiatives have led to some amelioration of the rights of Sikhs proscribed to enter India. However, the BJP’s policies in the Punjab and on religious minorities have undermined any room for accommodation with the Sikh diaspora.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the British Sikhs in the next decade is how to come to terms with English nationalism that has climaxed in the withdrawal from the European Union and now threatens the unity of the United Kingdom, with the independence of Scotland a distinct possibility and the association or merger of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland also

distinctly feasible. A union of England and Wales will be dominated by English nationalist opinion led by the Conservative Party. Beyond recognizing the outcome of Brexit and being willing to work with European Union institutions, there is little serious reflection among the British Sikh leadership of the long-term consequence of the rise of English nationalism. Perhaps because the Sikhs are concentrated in England, some of the groups have been reluctant to make common cause with Scottish or Welsh nationalists in their call for independence. The Labour Party remains the natural allies of the British Sikhs, yet in any resized Britain, it is likely to struggle to form a national government.

English nationalism today also threatens to undermine the democratization of public life begun by Prime Minister Tony Blair's administration with the aims of building an inclusive Britain. There are some indications that in the post-Brexit framework, a new hierarchy of minorities is emerging in which British Sikhs, like British Muslims, are being schizophrenically divided between "models" and "militants." There are powerful drivers within the current administration to not only roll back the legislation on minorities that Britain had to accept as a member of the European Union but also to create a new framework in which rights and obligations are clearly understood. Whether these impulses will eventually result in undermining the position of community such as Sikhs to ensure exemption from general rulemaking remains to be seen. What is certain however is that the position of Sikhs in British society today is much more vulnerable than two decades ago.

In writing the conclusion to *Sikhs in Britain* in 2006, we noted that

of all the Sikhs in the diaspora, it is the British Sikhs who have gone through the most intimate process of self-discovery as post-colonial people. Today they are faced with a stark choice between a historical, imperial, and neo-modernist past and plural cosmopolitan futures. The choice they make will have profound consequences for Sikhs all over the globe.

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In retrospect the choice we posed was too stark: the possibility of plural cosmopolitanism that would be underpinned by secular developments, such as the preponderance of the British-born, has most certainly been reversed. It is remarkable how in these years our optimistic reading of the community's future is now beset by a deep pessimism in which the gains of the last 50 years are once again under threat. The Sikh case in Britain, in contrast to Canada, is a salutary reminder that unless rights are positively enshrined in law with a legal commitment to the promotion of religious and ethnic diversity (*a la* multiculturalism ideological), negative affirmations ("opt-outs" from general rulemaking) provide poor protection. In short, they require regular minority mobilizations, a form of minority pleading to be allowed to live by sufferance.

There is no indication so far that the Sikh leadership in Britain, which has mostly functioned in the reactive mode, has anticipated the challenges ahead or is reflecting on them along with other religious and ethnic minorities. Brexit and post-pandemic Britain with its greatly diminished global role is passing through what historical institutionalists have called a "critical juncture" that is redefining the institutional framework for governance for the long term. What place minorities of New Commonwealth origin and others from the Global South occupy in this framework dominated by English nationalism is yet unclear. For a small and vulnerable minority like the Sikhs, it is difficult not to conclude that old methods of working the British state to their advantage are unlikely to provide results in the future. For British Sikhs, another decade of struggles and campaigning lies ahead.

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16

SIKHS IN THE USA

Sangeeta Kaur Luthra

Introduction

As a Sikh woman born and raised by immigrant parents who were middle-class professionals on the East Coast of the US, I had to interrogate and expand my own understanding of what it means to be a Sikh in the United States. In this chapter I try to present a picture that recognizes both the celebratory and the challenging. The celebratory is manifested in enduring foundations of Sikh life through the building of *gurdwaras* (Sikh houses of worship) and other institutions, the maintenance of Sikh traditions, and economic and educational achievements by individuals and communities. Challenges Sikhs face are also examined, including racial profiling, xenophobia, and hate crimes exacerbated by 9/11, as well as the often-unacknowledged hegemonies and divisions within the community. Diversity within the Sikh community is understood through varying migration patterns and the constructions and intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, generation, and other identifications. However, a shared ethos of pragmatic optimism, or *Chardi Kala*, is evident across a century of immigration and community building in the US.

Sikh Migrations to the United States

The first Sikh immigrants, often called “pioneers,” began arriving in small groups to the US around 1906. They were overwhelmingly young and middle-aged men from the Punjab region of India looking for economic opportunities in agriculture (Gonzalez 1986: 42–43, Leonard 1992: 4). They built networks and economic cooperatives to find work and build assets. The “Hindus,” as they were called by white Americans, were of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh religions, but 85% of the early Indian immigrants were Sikhs (Gould 2006: 90). According to Leonard, the pioneer Sikhs successfully “fit into California’s regional economies at several levels, although they had to battle ethnic stereotypes to do so” (1992: 21). From 1913 to 1946, discriminatory laws restricted immigration by Indians, barred family reunification, and denied basic rights to own property or apply for citizenship (La Brack 1980). In response to these restrictions, some migrants married Mexican women, forming a unique community of Punjabi-Mexican families in rural California (Leonard 1992: 203). These “biethnic” families faced discrimination but were able to build an economic and social foundation for themselves and the next generation (Leonard 1992: 203).

By 1910 the US Indian population had grown to 5,762, of which 4,897 were Sikhs (Gould 2006: 90). By 1912, the Sikh community had established the first *gurdwara* (Sikh house of worship) in Stockton, California (Leonard 1992: 130). The Stockton Sikh Temple became an important gathering place for all Punjabis – Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims – for social and political purposes as well as religious practice (Leonard 1992: 131). The Stockton community, led by Sirdar Jawala Singh, established the Guru Govind Singh Sahib Educational Scholarship to support aspiring students from India. The community also provided critical financial support for the anticolonial Ghadr Party (Gould 2006: 149, 167, 217). In the 1930s, Anup Singh and JJ Singh became involved in the Indian nationalist lobby in the US (Gould 2006: 306–311). High profile individuals like Bhagat Singh Thind and Dalip Singh Saund fought for Sikh and Indian civil rights by challenging discriminatory laws (Gould 2006: 315). By 1941 the Indian population grew to 8,572, of which the majority were Sikhs (Gould 2006: 91).

After the passing of the Luce-Celler Act of 1946, limited legal immigration from India was reestablished, including family reunification and the right to apply for citizenship. La Brack refers to the period between 1946 and 1965 as the “reconstitution period” during which the community revived traditional customs in the US and reestablished ties to family in India (1980: 1).

In 1965 the Immigration and Naturalization Act removed the quotas of Luce-Celler, and a third large wave of immigration began (Mann et al. 2008: 116). La Brack notes that the 1965 Act led to a doubling of the Sikh population in California in just one decade (1980: 134). According to Leonard, the Asian Indian population in California, which was majority Sikh, grew to 57,901 by 1980 (1992: 175).

Like their pioneer predecessors, post-1965 Sikh immigrants “exhibited a high degree of socioeconomic mobility . . . and economic self-sufficiency” (Gibson 1988: 44). Demographically, however, there were some important differences. Most Sikh immigrants in this period tended to be young, urban, educated professionals who mostly immigrated with their families. They settled throughout the country, with the largest populations in New York, California, Illinois, and New Jersey (Gonzalez 1986: 50–52). They also established *gurdwaras* wherever they settled and spread awareness about Sikhs and their culture. While the new arrivals were younger and urban, they were also more conservative about keeping their articles of faith like unshorn hair and turbans (La Brack 1980: 137).

In 1984 political events in India triggered another period of migration, which continued through the 1990s (Gonzalez 1986: 52). In June 1984, the Indian government executed a military operation targeting the Sikh’s holiest shrine, *Harimandir Sahib* (Golden Temple), in their home state of Punjab. The military takeover over of Punjab and the suspension of constitutional rights led many Sikhs to emigrate and seek asylum (Grewal 2010: 276–298). Many Sikhs living outside of Punjab also left India, having lost lives, property, and a sense of belonging after the November 1984 genocide against Sikhs in cities and towns across India. Finally, during this period, diasporic Sikhs from the UK, East Africa, and Southeast Asia also migrated to the US (Bhachu 1990; Kumar 2013; Mazumdar 2018).

While Sikhs of each generation have experienced prejudice, most hold onto the belief that the US is “‘the land of opportunity’ where suitably dedicated and ambitious young Indians could acquire the technologies, the advanced education, and even an appreciation of what a genuinely secular society was all about” (Gould 2006: 139). These sentiments persist and have been documented in other research on Sikhs in the United States (Gibson 1988: 83; Gumbel 2018; Leonard 1992: 24–25, 28–29, 34–35, 43; GD Singh, personal communication: May 1, 2019; Jakobsh 2008). Margaret Gibson, who conducted fieldwork from 1980 to 1983 in a Sikh immigrant community in a Central Valley town in California, offers this perspective:

By comparison [with their Mexican neighbors], most Punjabi [Sikh] immigrants find the American system extremely fair and open. Here, they say, a person is hired based on

educational credentials and experience, not according to caste or class background. . . . In general, they believe in the American system and its ability to safeguard their rights.

(Gibson 1988: 84)

Gibson (1988) and Leonard (2018) observed that these views often evolved across generations. US-born Sikhs are more critical of the educational and social system than their immigrant parents and are more likely to relate their own personal and social setbacks to the legacy of American institutional racism (Leonard 2018: 446–458; Gibson 1988: 86).

The turn of the twenty-first century has led to dramatic growth in both the Indian and Sikh populations. In 1990, the Indian population in the US was 450,000 and by 2017 grew almost tenfold to 4,402,362. We can assume that Sikh population numbers increased also, but the overall ratio of Sikhs within the Indian population has decreased dramatically since the early twentieth century.

Socioeconomic mobility has also continued in the twenty-first century. This is indicated in recent reports by the Pew Research Center, which show that Indian Americans, including Sikh Americans, are *on average* among the wealthiest and most educated subgroups of all American ethnic groups, including white Americans (Budiman et al. 2019; Pew Research 2017). Furthermore, ethnographic studies have shown that the children of working-class Sikh immigrants often achieved high levels of education (Gibson 1988: 43,170).

The only indigenous US-based Sikh community is the Sikh Dharma community, which marked its fiftieth anniversary in 2020. Sikh Dharma are Americans who were converted to the Sikh faith by the Sikh immigrant Harbhajan Singh Puri. Harbhajan Singh immigrated in 1968 to Los Angeles, where he began teaching yoga. Singh incorporated certain elements of Sikhism like *naam simran* and *kirtan* (meditation and hymns) into his yoga classes. Within a few years some of Harbhajan Singh's students began to delve more deeply into Sikhism and adopted the *Khalsa* (baptized Sikh) identity, which includes wearing a turban and keeping uncut hair. In 1975 a Sikh convert, Hari Nam Singh Elliot, served in the US military with his turban and beard (Elliot 1975). After 9/11, the Sikh Dharma worked with other Sikh communities to fight discrimination and educate the American public about Sikh faith, culture, and history (Dusenbery 2008: 44; Sikh Dharma International 2013). Notably, Sikh Dharma has been committed to women's equal participation in Sikh community life (Elsberg 2003, 2010: 299–328; Leonard 2018: 1–3).

While twenty-first-century immigration to the US has brought large numbers of new Sikh immigrants, a small but noteworthy segment of the Sikh population are undocumented. Kumar estimates annually 10,000 to 20,000 Sikhs have been leaving India through smuggling networks (2013: 118). These migrants feel pushed to leave by deteriorating social, political, environmental, and economic conditions in Punjab, while hopes of a better life pull them to countries like the US. In 2019, the Office of the Attorney General of California reported 9,118 Indians were in the state's detention centers (Becerra 2019: 16–17). According to recent news reports from Texas, Oregon, and California, approximately 40% of those “Entering Without Inspection” (EWI) are Sikhs (Jha 2019; Mazumdar 2018; V. Singh personal communication May 30, 2019).

Those who can get to the US, often face discrimination that is comparable to what the Sikh pioneers experienced. In April 2014, Jakara Movement published a blog report about the plight of Sikh detainees in El Paso, Texas. Undocumented Sikhs are increasingly in mainstream news reports due to the hunger strikes and protests by Sikhs in El Paso. On June 12, 2019, it was reported that six-year-old Gurupreet Kaur died while crossing the US–Mexico border with her mother (Hay 2019). The extreme conditions undocumented Sikhs endure to start new lives in the US mirrors the conditions of the Sikh migrants of the early twentieth century. Like the pioneer Sikh migrants, most undocumented migrants are young men from rural regions of Punjab who are willing to risk

their lives to build better futures elsewhere (Gonzalez 1986: 48; Kumar 2013: 120–121; Leonard 1992: 24–26, 27, 87).

The Sikh Population in the United States

Estimating the Sikh population in the United States is difficult because the US census does not enumerate based on religious affiliation. The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2019, citing data collected in 2015, provides an estimate of 358,321 Sikhs in the US (The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2019: 696). This data was generated by editors of the *World Christian Database*, Johnson and Zurlo (2018), who conducted a survey of religious affiliation among US residents (Leiden/Boston: Brill, August 2018). As this figure is from 2015, we can use census data for the Indian population in 2015, which was 3,982,000, to calculate the ratio of Sikhs to Indians to be 9% (Pew Research Center 2017). By 2017, the Indian population grew to 4,402,362. Using the 9% ratio we can calculate the Sikh to be 396,212 population in 2017 (SAALT 2019).

This number mostly likely does not include undocumented persons because they are much less likely to participate in government surveys (Drake 2013; Kamarck and Stenglein 2019). The organization SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together) reports that “as of 2017 there are 630,000 undocumented Indians in the US” (SAALT 2019). Using this data, we can calculate the number of undocumented Sikhs to be 9% of 630,000, or 56,700. The sum of these two figures equal 452,912 Sikhs in 2017. Finally, from 2015 to 2017 the number of new Indian immigrants grew by 420,362, an average increase of 5.1%. If we assume a similar rate of growth for 2018 and 2019, or a 10.2% increase, we can assume about 46,197 more Sikhs in the US, which gives us a final estimate of the US Sikh population for 2019 of 499,109. This calculation supports the estimates of 500,000 Sikhs by groups like Sikh Coalition and Harvard University’s Pluralism Project (2019).

Twenty-first-Century Trends

Sikhs in the US have faced significant challenges, as discussed previously, but have also had their share of successes. Next is a brief discussion of Sikhs in the US who have been recognized in various fields for their achievements. It is fitting to begin with Didar Singh Bains, known as the Peach King of California, was the son of a Sikh immigrant farmer, Gural Singh Bains. Over four generations, the Bains family has developed a thriving agricultural business in Yuba City, California (Christian 2017). Like the pioneer Sikh immigrants of the early twentieth century, who were known for their work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, today most Sikhs work in and often own small businesses. Recently Sikh entrepreneurship in the trucking industry was highlighted in news reports describing approximately 30,000 Sikhs in this sector (Axelrod 2018).

In the area of technology and innovation, Sikhs like Narinder Singh Kapany have been lauded for transformative research and innovation. Other notable business figures include Jagdeep Singh, Silicon Valley entrepreneur and technologist; Sonny Singh, senior vice president and general manager at Oracle Corporation; and Ajaypal Singh Banga, CEO of Mastercard, Inc. An example of excellence in education is Ms. Serene Singh, who in 2018 was the first Sikh American woman to become a Truman Scholar and the first Sikh American Rhodes Scholar (Bounds 2018; Singh 2018).

Sikhs have also made a mark in American politics and government. The first Asian American and first Sikh elected to the US Congress was Dalip Singh Saund, who served from 1957 to 1963. Today there are numerous Sikhs serving in political office and government agencies: Preetinder Singh Bharara, former US attorney for the Southern District of New York; Gurbir Singh Grewal, sixty-first attorney general of New Jersey; Kashmir Gill, mayor of Yuba City, California, who was also

the first Sikh elected as mayor in the US; Preet Didbal, former mayor of Yuba City, California, was also the first female Sikh mayor in the US; Ravinder Singh Bhalla, mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey; Harmeet Kaur Dhillon, National Committeewoman for the California State Republican National Committee; and Manka Dhingra, Washington State Senator and the first Sikh woman elected to a US state legislature. In addition, many other Sikhs are serving on school boards, city councils, and other government positions around the US.

The performing arts is another area of participation by Sikhs, like Hollywood actor and designer Waris Singh Ahluwalia; documentarian, author, and activist Valerie Kaur; Gurujas Kaur Khalsa, Grammy recipient in 2017; and Snatam Kaur, Grammy nominee in 2018. Many other Sikh artists, particularly in the millennial and generation z cohorts, are collectively driving a renaissance of music, dance, graphic art, poetry, and entertainment through various media.

Museum exhibitions and film and art festivals are also important sites for Sikh culture. Narinder Singh Kapany became a patron of Sikh arts, culture, and scholarship through *The Sikh Foundation* (est. 1967). In 1999 Kapany endowed a permanent collection of Sikh art at the San Francisco Museum of Asian Art. Since the 1990s, the *Sikhlens* festival has been a forum for artists and filmmakers. In 2002, the first Sikh exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History was displayed (Taylor 2004: 221–222, 225). The Smithsonian exhibition was spearheaded by *The Sikh Heritage Foundation* founded by Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha, Dr. Jaswinder Kaur Chattha, Dr. Sohan Singh Chaudhary, Mrs. Kamal Kaur Chaudhary, and other donors. In 2012, the *Becoming American Museum* in Yuba City, California, opened an exhibition about Sikhs in the Western United States. Finally, university-based Sikh studies programs are important sites for scholarship and public education about Sikhs, their culture, and their history.

Gurdwaras and Sangats: Building Community Institutions

In the United States and around the world, the gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) is the central institution for Sikh communities. The gurdwara is a space for religious, cultural, and political activities. According to the website World Gurudwaras, there are 284 gurdwaras in the United States (2019). While the majority of gurdwaras in the US are nonsectarian and follow the Singh Sabha standards developed in India at the turn of the twentieth century, there are some gurdwaras that are community-affiliated, like Ramgarhia, Ravidass, and Sikh Dharma. The World Gurudwaras website (2019) lists one Ramgarhia society, six Ravidass gurdwaras, and 26 Sikh Dharma gurdwaras in the US. The Pluralism Project by Harvard University lists 277 Sikh places of worship and study, of which 38 are Sikh Dharma gurdwaras and organizations (2013).

Gurdwaras and Sikh *sangats* (congregations) are found in 38 states, and Washington, DC, in rural, urban, and suburban settings. Sikh *sangats* can range from a few dozen members to thousands of members. California has the most gurdwaras with 71 listed on the Gurdwaras of the World site. California is also home to the first gurdwara built in 1912 in Stockton, California, and to the largest gurdwara completed in 2011 in San Jose, California.

Regardless of location or size, gurdwaras share certain key characteristics and functions. They house the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh holy scripture), they fly the *Nishan Sahib* (Sikh flag), and they provide *langar* (community meals) for the *sangat* (congregation) and all visitors.

Gurdwaras are also the spaces in which community festivals, Sikh holy days, and national holidays like New Year's Eve and the Fourth of July are celebrated.

While education is reflected in every aspect of the gurdwara, most have some form of regular Sunday school for children. Many gurdwaras also host camps for children during summer or winter vacations. Programs for adults include community conferences, guest speakers, and scriptural study,

often called *Gurbani Vichaar*, a discussion or exegesis of Sikh scriptures. Finally, gurdwaras are preferred sites for important family rituals and ceremonies. Some of these are *Amrit Sanskar* (baptism), *Anand Karaj* (marriage), *Charni Lagna* and *Dastaar Bandi* (coming-of-age ceremonies), *Antam Sanskar* (prayers for the deceased), and *Ardas* (prayers for blessings and giving thanks). All these activities enable the essential work of passing down Sikh traditions to the next generation.

Politics has historically had a place in Sikh gurdwaras, serving as a common for community planning and action. In the early twentieth century, US Sikhs used gurdwaras to support the struggle for Indian independence from British rule (Leonard 1992: 130–133; Gould 2006: 145, 167, 217). In the 1980s, a struggle between the *Khalistani*, or Sikh separatist, movement and the Indian government led to another period of organizing and debate within gurdwaras around the world (Purewal and Lallie 2013: 398–400).

Politics within US gurdwaras has three main themes: appropriate management of gurdwaras, political and social issues in Punjab and India, and outreach to non-Sikh groups at local and national levels. The latter became prominent after 9/11, as Sikhs experienced a spike in hate crimes. Gurdwaras and Sikh civil rights organizations began to invest more time and resources engaging non-Sikh neighbors and community officials. These efforts intensified in 2012 after a mass shooting at a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, left six dead and four injured. The shooter was Wade Michael Page, a self-avowed white supremacist. The attack left Sikh activists and community organizers grieving and uncertain about their work to protect Sikhs from such attacks (Jakobsh 2018: 104–105). Rather than deflate Sikh activism, the attack led to renewed community engagement and efforts to protect Sikh communities and fight racism in general.

Sikh activism is multifaceted and includes participating in interfaith programs and outreach through events like the Yuba City *nagar kirtan* (religious procession), the annual Sikh Day Parade in New York City, and Sikh floats in the annual Rose Parade in Los Angeles. These have become important educational events for Sikhs and non-Sikhs (IJ Singh 2003: 111–116). Other forms of engagement involve connecting with local and state officials, organizing service projects, and promoting civil rights. Gurdwaras and Sikh humanitarian organizations like United Sikhs and Khalsa Aid offer food and shelter to their fellow citizens during natural disasters and other crises. These programs have improved relations with non-Sikh neighbors and communities. Other forms of Sikh civic engagement include voter registration drives; emergency preparedness drills; sponsoring Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops; encouraging community-based research like the 1984 Living History Project; and supporting writers, artists, and small businesspeople.

Gurdwara governance models in the US are also evolving, although more detailed study is required (Barrier 1999: 366–368). Many gurdwaras are incorporated under state nonprofit religious corporation laws, which include the establishment of bylaws of governance. There seem to be three models of governance. The first is the board of trustee's model, which are made up of lifetime trustees, often founding members, and elected trustees. A second model is the *prabandhak* (management) committee, which is elected by registered members of the congregation. A third model is direct management by founders, often individuals or small groups who financed the building of the gurdwara. In this model, the founders set guidelines for conduct at the gurdwara and ask members to agree to abide by those. This third model has been seen by some communities to avoid conflict and factionalism often exacerbated by elections (GD Singh, personal communication: May 1, 2109).

The few studies of conflict and factionalism in US gurdwaras suggest that these issues became more common in the late 1980s and 1990s (Barrier 1999: 366, 368; Leonard 1999: 275, 294). Factionalism and conflict continue to be a feature of gurdwara politics as illustrated by a multi-year court case at the Sikh Gurdwara Sahib of San Jose from 2015 to 2019 (Rodriguez 2015). Factionalism seems to arise for various reasons: differences in philosophy, sectarian, and socioeconomic

differences, and/or growing populations competing over resources. Karen Leonard (1999) and Doris Jakobsh (2006) have both observed that Sikh youth dislike conflict and factionalism in gurdwaras and cite it as a disincentive for participating in gurdwara activities.

The Future of Sikhs in the US: Sikh millennials and youth look to new institutions and cultural revitalization.

The September 11, 2001, attacks had a profound impact on life for Sikh Americans. The backlash against Sikhs, often due to their turbans and beards, generated what Jaideep Singh labels a “new American apartheid” (Singh 2013: 1). In response, Sikhs began building a new generation of civil rights, advocacy, and service organizations. A large proportion, 79%, of these organizations were founded and/or are managed by millennial-generation Sikhs (Luthra 2018: 1; also see “Table of Sikh institutions in the US” in Appendix). In addition, Sikh women are also well-represented at 63% in these organizations’ leadership positions (Luthra 2017). Greater leadership opportunities for Sikh women and young Sikhs are important sociocultural trends. In particular, the digital fluency of millennial and gen z Sikhs has been significant in mobilizing resources for civic and political engagement. While gurdwaras continue to be central spaces for Sikh life in the US, post 9/11 organizing has spearheaded the resistance to discrimination and built new institutional spaces for Sikhs.

These new institutions support a variety of political and social initiatives, including civil rights, policy reform, advocacy, public relations, and building alliances with communities and causes like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, and immigrant and refugee rights (Jakobsh 2006: 34, IJ Singh 2003, Luthra 2018). These initiatives have generated interest in and deeper engagement with local and national bureaucracies, which has helped reverse some of the discriminatory policies affecting Sikhs (Sidhu and Gohil 2009: 163–167; 189–200). Growing familiarity with government is reflected in a growing number of Sikhs running for elected office. Other organizations like Jakara Movement and SikhRi (Sikh Research Institute) focus on community development through youth programs, camps, educational tools, seminars centered on gurbani (Sikh theology) and Sikh history, and academic conferences exploring a range of issues related to the community.

There has also been a significant growth in art, poetry, literature, comedy, drama, film, dance, and music generated by Sikhs. Artistic expression has generated new social spaces and networks for Sikh youth. For example, literature for Sikh children saw significant growth after 9/11 (Chanda 2013: 360). US-based authors like Pushpinder Kaur, Jessi Kaur, Parveen Kaur Dhillon, Navjot Kaur, Rina Singh, and Inni Kaur have been contributors in this area (Chanda 2013: 360–363).

The Hemkunt Foundation has also offered educational programs for Sikh youth focused on theology and history since 1980 (Hemkunt Foundation 2020). Through its annual *kirtan* (hymns) and speech competitions, the foundation encourages school-age Sikh children to learn about Sikh history, ethics, and *kirtan* and to connect with Sikh youth from around the US. The competitions start in gurdwaras and progress through zonal competitions to the final international competition. Currently there are 25 zones out of which sixteen are in the US, seven in England, and one in Kenya. Each of the gurdwara and zonal competitions involve dozens of children who spend months preparing and practicing their speeches and *kirtan*. The *kirtan darbar* (presentation of devotional hymns) programs have sparked a revival of the classical style, referred to as *gurmata sanget* (Guru’s music), which is performed in *ragas* (Indian classical scales) accompanied by fifteenth-century instruments (Purewal and Lallie 2013: 392). The 2019 international competition in Iselin, New Jersey, had 167 Sikh children competing. The Hemkunt foundation programs impact hundreds of Sikh youth and their families and foster important social networks for each generation.

Another creative and social outlet for Sikh youth is in the competitive *bhangra* (Punjabi folk dance) circuit, which emerged in the late 1990s and is largely made up of collegiate and club teams. The bhangra circuit also provides a platform for young Sikhs to engage with Punjabi

language, music, and culture. According to the website Bhangra Teams Forum 2019, there are about 21 bhangra competitions around the US with approximately 45 teams. The circuit has become a subcultural phenomenon that includes dancers, families, friends, fans, musicians, videographers, bhangra schools, and other performing artists. A number of scholars have written about the significance and spread of bhangra in the diaspora and the US (Maira 1998; Roy 2010; Schreffler 2013: 384, 387).

Finally, given the younger generation's role in regenerating Sikh communities, it is useful to look at new attitudes and trends in marriage practices embraced by younger Sikhs. Karen Leonard notes that more second-generation Sikhs are finding their own partners online (2018: 6). Leonard describes the changing attitudes and practices among younger Sikhs in the US:

South Asian American millennial Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims demonstrate a widening range of partner choices, marriage rituals, and celebratory practices. For young American Sikhs . . . the roles of the bride and groom in planning their weddings are increasingly important, and the cultural or secular aspects of the weddings are also increasingly important and come from multiple sources. Furthermore, rather than considering community, the young people are emphasizing individual choice. These conclusions should be viewed positively, pointing to adaptation and cultural translations at the level of the couples, families, religious or regional diasporic communities.

(Leonard 2018: 18–19)

The “translations” of tradition referenced in the previous section can be seen as the revitalization of Sikh culture and community through the performance of cultural practices, collective memories, and social solidarities. Leonard's observations offer a note of pragmatic optimism for the future of Sikhs in the US.

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Table 16.1 Sikh American Organizations Established Post-9/11/2001. Registered.

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Base Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials* Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
2001	Sikh Coalition	USA	Civil Rights/Advocacy; Education; Media	13/14 = 93%	M: 5/14 = 36% F: 9/14 = 64%
2001	Sikhcess	USA	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2002	Kaur Foundation	USA	Women; Public Relations and Education	No info	No info
2003	Sikh Research Institute	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	6/8 = 75%	M: 20/24 = 83% F: 4/24 = 17%
2004	Kaurs United (CA branch)	USA	Women; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info
2004	ENSAAF	USA	Civil Rights/Advocacy	7/7 = 100%	M: 2/7 = 29% F: 5/7 = 71%
2006	Sikh Sports Association of USA	USA	Youth and Community Services	0/10 = 0%	M: 10/10 = 100% F: 0/10 = 0%
2006	The Surat Initiative	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	12/12 = 100%	M: 6/12 = 50% F: 6/12 = 50%
2006	Sikh Encyclopedia	India	Public Relations and Education	No info	No info
2007	Sikhs for Justice	USA	Civil Rights/Advocacy	0/2 = 0%	M: 2/2 = 100% F: 0/2 = 0%
2008	Sikh Relief (formerly Sikh Organization for Prisoners Welfare (SOPW))	UK	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2008	Saanjh Retreat	USA	Youth and Community Services	No info	No info
2009	Sikh Family Center	USA	Youth and Community Services; Seva and Charity	3/6 = 50%	M: 1/6 = 17% F: 5/6 = 83%
2009	Sikh Channel	USA	Media	No info	No info
2010	SAFAR: The Sikh Feminist Research Institute	Canada/USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Women	3/6 = 53%	F: 6/6 = 100%
2010	Bhagat Puran Health Initiative (BPSHI)	USA	Seva and Charity; Community Services	100%	

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Base Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials* Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
2010	Punjabi Cultural Association of the Central Valley Inc.	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info
2010	Sikh Empowerment Voluntary Association (SEVA)	USA	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2010	Dasvandh Network	USA	Seva, Charity, Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	6/7 = 86%	M: 3/7 = 43% F: 4/7 = 57%
2011	Sikh American Chamber of Commerce	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info
2011	Sikh Women Now	USA	Women; Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2013	Sikh Women Alliance Inc.	Britain/UK	Women; Seva and Charity	1/6 = 17%	M: 0/6 = 0% F: 6/6 = 100%
2013	Portrait of Sikhs	UK	Cultural; Blog/Website; Public Relations and Education	1/1 = 100%	M: 1/1 = 100% F: 0/1 = 0%
2014	National Sikh Campaign	USA	Media; Public Relations and Education	No info	No info
Unknown	Sikh Youth Alliance of North America (SYANA)	North America	Youth and Community Services	No info	No info
Unknown	Sikhs for Technology	North America, Europe	Youth and Community Services	No info	No info
Unknown	5rivers Foundation	USA	Cultural Preservation	No info	No info
Unknown	Sikh24.com	India, Europe, Australia, Pacific, Asia, Americas	Media; News	No info	No info

Table 16.2 Sikh American Organizations Established Post-9/11/2001. Not Registered/For-Profit.

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
2004	Rootsgear	USA	Cultural; Website	100%	M: 2/2 = 100% F: 0/2 = 0%
2007	The Langar Hall		Website; Public Relations and Education	No info	No info
2010	1984 Living History Project (founded at Saanjh youth retreat)	USA	Media, Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info
2010	American Turban	USA	Blog; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	1/1 = 100%	M: 1/1 = 100%
2010	Nishkam Sikh Welfare Organization USA Inc.	USA	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2011	Sikh Love Stories Project	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Women	3/6 = 50%	M: 0/6 = 0% F: 6/6 = 100%
2011	Kaurista		Blog; Cultural; Women	No info	No info
2012	American Sikh Political Action Committee	USA	Civil Rights/ Advocacy; Public Relations and Education	No info	No info
2012	Kaur Life	USA	Women; Cultural; Online Magazine	2/2 = 100%	M: 0/2 = 0% F: 2/2 = 100%
2012	2 Brown Girls	UK	Website; Women; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	2/2 = 100%	M: 0/2 = 0% F: 2/2 = 100%
2013	Singh Street Style	UK	Website; v Store; Cultural Preservation; Public Relations and Education	1/1 = 100%	M: 1/1 = 100% F: 0/1 = 0%
Unknown	Sikh Chic	Canada	Website; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Youth	No info	No info

Table 16.3 Sikh American Organizations Established Pre-9/11/2001. Registered.

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1967	Sikh Foundation International	USA	Education; Community Empowerment; Cultural Preservation	4/16 = 25%	M: 13/16 = 81% F: 3/16 = 19%
Late 1970s	Sikh Dharma International	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	0/10 = 0% www.sikhdharma.org/staff/	M: 2/9 = 22% F: 7/9 = 78%
1984	Association of Sikh Professionals (ASP)	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	0/4 = 0%	M: 4/4 = 100% F: 0/4 = 0%
1984	World Sikh Council	India	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Public Relations and Education	www.worldsikhcouncil.org/about/committee.html No info	No info
1984	Sikhnet.com	USA	News; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info
1985	Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG)	Britain	Public Relations and Education; Civil Rights/Advocacy	No info	No info
1992	North American Sikh Medical and Dental Association (NASMDA)	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	0/13 = 0%	M: 10/13 = 77% F: 3/13 = 23%
1993	Punjabi American Heritage Society (PAHS)	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	0/40 = 0%	M: 22/40 = 55% F: 18/40 = 45%
1996	American Sikh Council (formerly World Sikh Council-America Region)	USA	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Public Relations and Education	0/15 = 0%	M: 12/15 = 80% F: 3/15 = 20%
1995	Sikhlens	USA	Media; Cultural Preservation and Education	No info	M: 1/2 = 50% F: 1/2 = 50%
1996	Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) (formerly Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART))	USA	Civil Rights/Advocacy; Media	3/3 = 100%	

(Continued)

Table 16.3 (Continued)

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1998	Sikh Council on Religion and Education (SCORE)	USA	Public Relations and Education; Civil Rights/Advocacy	0/14	M: 13/14 = 93%
1998	Sikh Awareness Society (SAS)	Britain/UK	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Public Relations and Education; Youth and Community Services	No info	F: 1/14 = 7% No info
1999	United Sikhs	Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, North America	Civil Rights/Advocacy; Seva and Charity	No info	No info
1999	Sikh Videos	India	Media	No info	No info
2000	The Jakara Movement	USA	Education; Youth and Community Services; Seva and Charity	4/4 = 100%	2/4 = 50% 2/4 = 50%
2010	Nishkam Sikh Welfare Organization USA Inc.	USA	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
2010	Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council	India	Seva and Charity	No info	No info
Unknown	AllAboutSikhs.com	Unknown	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	No info	No info

Table 16.4 Sikh American Organizations Established Pre-9/11/2001. Inactive/Banned.

<i>Year Est.</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Millennials Total/Percentage</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1968 (banned)***	Sikh Youth Federation USA	USA	Youth; Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education	N/A	N/A
1997 (inactive)	F.A.T.E.H.—The Fellowship of Activists to Embrace Humanity	USA	Seva and Charity	N/A	N/A
1984 (inactive)	World Sikh Organization Canada (WSO–Canada) (America Region still active: American Sikh Council)	Canada	Cultural Preservation and Sikh Education; Public Relations and Education	<i>www.worldsikh. org/our_team</i>	N/A

*Millennials = Those born between 1980 and 2000 and are ages 16–36 years old.

* “Public Relations & Education” indicates audience is non-Sikh.

** “Cultural Preservation & Sikh Education” indicates audience is Sikh community.

*** Banned under new US terrorism legislation. Added to the US Treasury Department terrorism list on June 27, 2002. In April 2004, ISYF added to US terror list, allowing the US to deny entry (and to deport) any of its members.



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PART III

Ethical Issues



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GENDER AND SIKHI

*Jasleen Singh***Introduction**

In 2009, the highest spiritual and temporal seat within the global Sikh community, Sri Akal Takht, issued a statement to prohibit Sikh gurdwaras worldwide from initiating the Anand Karaj between same-sex Sikh couples. Later in 2015, this statement was reissued in acceptance of the Indian Supreme Court decision, section 377, that criminalized same-sex relationships. While the Supreme Court has since retracted that decision and has made consensual same-sex relationships legal, the Sikh community continues to claim non-heteronormativity to be anti-*gurmata* and, therefore, illegitimate. In consequence, consenting same-sex relationships have now gone “underground” and made to feel unnatural to the normativity of heterosexual life within Sikh households. Countless Sikh queer and trans community members feel isolated and otherised amongst their own kin. They are perpetually self-objectified, labeled as “sinners,” and terrorized with violence and abandonment by their families and communities that otherwise would have proclaimed them to be part of a larger Sikh *qaum*.

Queer Sikhs stand on two crossroads that exist in the realm of contradictions. On one hand, they’re invalidated as Sikhs within the communities they live, while on another, they continue to rely on Sikh concepts (of *hukam* and *ik onkar*) to reflect on the very real-life experiences and affects that drive their impulse to identify with non-normative gendered practices. Their existence within “two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of restlessness” (a phrase borrowed from Gloria Anzaldúa, 2012) offers them consciousness of being in the third space that reveals ways of knowing about the ontological construction of the two modern categories, namely, Sikh and queer identities, both of which seem too rigid to accommodate one another. This third space offers them a place of relief. It is a place where life flourishes all whilst defying the rationalist ideals of authenticity set in place by culturally specific notions of religion, gender, and sexuality. It is from this third space where this chapter also emerges and aims to accomplish two important tasks. First, it will explore the construction of the two categories, namely, gender and religion, as they’re managed by the liberal secular discourse of identity. I will begin by exploring the “history of the state of the field” within gender studies and offer my brief remarks on how gender and sexuality is employed within Sikh studies. Second, the chapter will begin to signal moments within Sikh and queer subjectivities that reflect the transitive lived experience of Sikhs from the time of the Sikh Gurus to the present day. The effort is to explore how new ways of reading and conceptualizing

life can emerge from the *gurmata* practice of ego-loss. Unhinging Sikh principles, or the *Shabad*, from the secular-religious regime of Western imperialism can open us to the world of non-oppositional forms of consciousness that emerges out of our relations with the boundlessness (or *be-ant*) of life. Therefore, the broader aim of this reading practice is not only to make Sikh concepts relevant to the present day lived experiences and thought but to also resituate them within the nexus of knowledge circuits as embodied forms of ethical thinking. By applying Sikh concepts to lived experiences, we can challenge the ideological and political processes that structure the racial, casteist, gendered, and sexual construction, division, and oppression of life, set in place through the devices of rational thought and its modern secular forms of religion-makings. This offers us an opportunity to take an ethical standpoint as Sikhs to open ourselves up as transitive beings to the diversity and creativity of life, in celebration of the divine imperative (*hukam*) within all existence.

Gender and the State of the Field

What is gender? A question that may seem obviously simple at first has been a point of critical inquiry for centuries. From the time of Guru Nanak to the most recent postcolonial feminist, gender transgression has come with an immense cost to one's place in society. Today, the common understanding of gender originates from a belief that safeguards its natural and essential characteristics and difference. One is either a male or a female. This division is seen as both natural and essential across time, cultures, and civilizations. However, feminist scholars over the years have not only questioned the naturalness of these categories but also the power structures that have been instructive in disciplining and normalizing gendered division across time and cultural contexts.

The field of gender studies within Western academic discourse began as a women's studies discipline and later developed a critical study of gender and gendered representation. The field developed with the intent to resist material and ideological exclusion of women from public spaces that were essentially male dominated. The exclusion of women, their gendered perspectives, and experiences had been the primary concern of the first-wave feminists' practice that struggled to decenter maleness/masculinity from its normative place in society. In addition, white middle-class women continued to universalize women's experiences, whilst sidelining issues of racial and class oppression experienced by women of color. The first-wave feminism preceded later feminist moments by women of color, whose struggle against racial injustice and class oppression led to race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ablism being included as analytical categories of both power and oppression. By proclaiming their racial and class identities, women of color argued for solidarity amongst other women who acknowledge their different lived experiences and perspectives from that of white middle-class women (Hooks 1986). While they utilized an identity framework to demand visibility, women of color began to define feminist movements through a pluralistic approach in both understanding oppression and difference. Theories such as the Standpoint theory and theory of intersectionality both critiqued the modern constructedness of social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, and the very real consequence of their violence and oppression on people of color (Collin 1990). Theory of intersectionality was developed by a Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, as a tool for analyzing subjects who "exist . . . within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourses and in the empty spaces between" (Crenshaw 1992: 403). Those who exist in such margins expose the instability within identifying categories and reveal the necessity to critique group politics that are based on uniforming perspectives and goals. Crenshaw argued that the "real problem of identity politics is that it elides intra-group differences." Intersectionality therefore attended to the subjects whose lived experiences contested specific racial and gender categorizations (Nash 2008).

Scholars of third-wave feminisms have since built on their structural critique of race and gender through postcolonial and postmodern thinking. One of the key aspects of their social and intellectual movement has been the deconstruction of identifying categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, and religion, that have been imposed on them through colonial processes. Feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler, studied the genealogy of gender by examining the political and ideological stakes in using specific identifying categories as markers of gendered difference. She questioned both the relational aspects of the terms and the power that constitute the meaning of male and female identities. Within modern figuration, gendered difference is derived from Christian understanding of the divine being a masculine ideal with paternalistic characteristics. This theo-cultural understanding of the world led to the conflation of masculinity with divinity and an embeddedness of patriarchal values and perspectives across all realms of Western society. These moral sentiments of evangelical Christians in Britain were then imposed onto the colonized societies through religious and public laws that were popularly described by commentators as “muscular Christianity”—a notion that raised the moral standing of the colonists to that of activists who’re committed to civilize the heathens (van der Veer 2001: 88).

Postcolonial religious scholars have argued that our current understanding of masculine and feminine traits is an outcome of a sustained interaction between the imperial powers and the elite natives who proclaimed themselves to be men of “religion.” Here I’m referring to the practice of religion-making that was instituted by the colonial empire to tame and order the cultural heterogeneity within native societies. For example, religion was utilized by the Singh Sabha movement to reformulate the sociocultural frameworks within the Sikh tradition in accordance with the Protestant Christian theological understanding of God, belief, and morality. This made Sikhism both legible to the Western world and akin to other religions around the world. Moral issues of religious and racial purity were raised as a threat within religious communities, leading to specific cultural laws aimed at controlling women’s bodies. The assemblage of gendered traits was inspired by British colonial self-perceptions of racial and religious superiority (read: masculinity) and native inferiority (read: femininity) and were related to notions of race and nation building (van der Veer 2001). Native elites responded to this construction of Christian masculinity and native femininity with cultural and religious mimicry. They too cultivated an authentic ethno-religious image of themselves through civilizing missions, sports, and literature that needed safeguarding through herculean means of heroism and militarization. Recuperated masculine images of Sikh wo(men) were necessary for Sikh nationalist discourse to run counter to the muscular Christianity of British colonialism. This became evident in the reformist works of Bhai Vir Singh’s *Sundri* (1898) and Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha’s *Hum Hindu Nahin* (“We are not Hindus” – 1898). These militaristic images reinforced the colonial machinery that had tied hypermasculine characteristics of the Sikhs to concepts of martial race within colonial Punjab. British recruiting officers used the concept of the martial race to not only compare soldiers across units but to also construct a standard of masculinity more generally for the British imperial power in India.

The very ability of “martial race” soldiers to make war was conflated with their masculinity, as in the well-known pronouncement that they were “manly” in their warlike creed. . . . Their ferocity and violence discursively erased all so-called “feminine” qualities such as softness, weakness, vulnerability, and faithlessness. So intertwined were the qualities of the “martial race” with an idealized notion of masculinity that officers frequently referred to them simply as the “manly” races.

(Streets 2004: 12)

In consequence, Jat Sikhs belonging to the *Khalsa* creed were racialized as being “true Sikhs” possessing warrior-like qualities that converts to Sikhism lacked and were strategically selected for

recruitment by the British Indian army. A strict adherence to their religious code of conduct was required in order to maintain the characteristics that the colonists deemed were essential to their “martial” characteristics. Employment into the British Indian military cemented specific caste and class segmentations across Sikh communities and racialized a heterogeneous tradition by privileging the landowning classes with further economic and social incentives, such as land grants, salaries, pensions, travel incentives, and social authority over other native members of the community. Streets mentions in her book *Martial Races: The Military, Race, and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* how the image of the “martial race” was a realignment of imperial masculine values with the deliberate intent of the empire to replenish its armies with loyal subjects who could fight against their nationalist counterparts both in and outside of Britain.

Today the iconography of a warrior Sikh is partly an extension of this colonial machinery that continues to rely on the celebration of the fabulous image of an “invincible, loyal, racially pure, manly figure” of a martial race. These images act as munition for the modern state, ready to fire against any acts of transgression against the secular liberal values of the state and its modern intellectual apparatus that objectifies and governs the world through constructs of race, religion, gender, sexuality, nationality, caste, etc. The daily use of terms such as gender, race, religion, sexuality almost assume a sense of naturalness in them that is not inherent in their construction. However, Sikhs across all walks of life continue to challenge these categories through their lived experiences, in a manner that can essentially question what is more natural or authoritative (*Hukam*, according to Sikh conception of reality/truth) – the categories that determine specific configurations of life, or the very life itself in its unruly, unnamable, innumerable configuration and relations?

Gender within Sikh studies continues to experience the stronghold of Western modern conceptualization of life. Whether it is scholarship that comes from the secular corners of the world that writes Sikh women into political history (Gayer 2012, Butalia 2017, Luthra 2017), examines their experience of gender identity through their artwork (Ratti, 2013), or one that explores the realm of the transcendence by looking at women in *kirtan* (recitation of Sikh text) (Cassio 2014, Bhogal 2016), historical events (Singh 2005), and Sikhism, more generally (Jakobsh 2014). Scholars have used gender as a construct to advocate for women’s visibility and equality, in order to bring the feminine at par with the masculine symbolic. This effort “to include” has erased the need to question the nature of the symbolic order that makes the process of representation necessary in order for one to have a life of its own. In other words, current scholarship either humanizes women’s experiences within the given symbolic or objectifies divinity through specific uses of the feminine. Both processes fail to challenge the objective nature of knowledge through the very act of representation (i.e., either as human, man, or the goddess). The essentializing aspects of identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, caste, religions, etc., and acts of representation, in general, are used to fixate the lived experiences of Sikhs through specific uses of the “I,” which the Sikh Gurus have tried to liberate us from through both their spoken word and their social relations. Therefore, the task here is, how do we begin to use categories such as race, gender, caste, and religion that would de-essentialize them from within? How do we challenge the essentializing aspects of identity that act through the portal of difference and release their stronghold on the plurality of life and lived experiences? How do Sikh concepts aid us in the process of disinheriting some of the Western frameworks we have internalized as specific ways of knowing and living life as Sikhs? These are some questions that scholars within Sikh studies and leaders within the Sikh world must ask in order to critically engage with life at large, both in between cultures and within the margins of our community.

Where Do We Go From Here?

What is well-known is that a specific modern understanding of a gendered identity and performance comes to represent what it means to be a Sikh. This is true of various cultures that place themselves within the world-religion discourse and proclaim God to be male or of a masculine subjectivity. However, as Naomi Goldenberg notes in her essay, “Queer theory meets critical religion” (2017) gender, queer, and religion have never been natural or stable categories. Religious studies scholars, such as Johnathan Smith, historicized the use of religion in the early fifth century to be specific to Roman Christian culture and their understanding of ritual performance. The term “religion” became a salient category following Protestant Reformation, when ideals of self-consciousness constructed a new universal understanding of religion that overshadowed the authority of the church and the need for corporal practices. This understanding of religion, which was based on a particular religious culture (namely, Protestant Christianity), was used by the West as a comparative imaginary and a “signifying practice that described, classified, annotated, analyzed, represented, prescribed and ordered the cultural and material worlds of its colonial subjects” (Venn 1997: 147). As Europeans began to encounter non-Christian cultures, the term “religion” was made universal by virtue of systematically mapping cultures and civilizations based on standards of Protestant Christian theology. Cultures were classified into variations of “primitive” versus “institutionalized” religions (Smith 1998). Several aspects of non-Western cultures were now being translated as “religious” and guarded closely by the states’ legislative powers that would outlaw or abolish cultural practices that were deemed outside the realm of translatability in accordance with Protestant Christian theology. “Religion” became a discursive category, strategically used by the European colonial and secular state to regulate non-European cultural practices.

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair describes this process of “religion-making” as a “regime of representation” that is driven by “constructing equivalence and reciprocity between texts, cultures, or concepts” in order to establish European hegemony over knowledge formation (Mandair 2017: 175). And while a growing body of scholars have established the fact that religion has never been native to all cultures nor is it understood in the same way (see the critical work of Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Richard King, S.N. Balagangadhara, Timothy Fitzgerald, Naomi Goldenberg, and Tomoko Masuzawa), community leaders continue to prescribe religiously motivated moral equivalence across cultures, especially in regards to issues around homo and heteronormativity.

Feminist work within religious studies has been aimed towards reducing sexism within religious traditions and seeking women’s contribution for the purposes of making religious institutions more permissible to women’s presence, history, voices, and interpretations. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and her feminist critique has had a major impact within Sikh studies. In her book *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-memory of Sikh Identity*, Singh utilized the re-memory and re-reading of the Sikh text in a deliberate attempt to interrupt the masculinist memory of the events within Sikh history. She questions the androcentric readings of the historical narratives by the Sikh reformers and makes room for alternate readings to take place that are from the standpoint of women. In her poignant critique, she states the following:

Guru Gobind Singh’s *Jaap* contains an endless list of vital terms that significantly are gender unspecific: “hurler,” “creator,” “protector,” “sustainer,” “food of foods,” “song of songs,” “light of lights.” These open-ended expressions have been reduced to male personifications, and many Sikhs would consider it practically sacrilegious to recognize them as female agents. To insert a “she” in place of the “he” in commentaries and translations would be sheer anathema. Sikh theologians fear idols, and yet, by refraining from including the female imaginary in the

vision of the formless One of their gurus, they succumb to an idol of masculinity. They only end up making their “monotheistic” religion into an “androtheistic” one, which itself is a form of idolatry.

(Singh 2005: 150)

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s important contribution within Sikh feminism has been to take into consideration that what has been made into an “other” within “proper” Sikh historiography and philosophy of religion. In other words, to see the divine command in the objectified female body and the feminine voice within Sikh text. For example, her image of the Guru Gobind Singh as a maternal figure is a stark departure from earlier forms of iconography of the Guru, as a virile and “herculean-like” militaristic figure. By recognizing the “female sides of the heroic guru,” the author brings to focus aspects of the feminine that are lost to an androcentric reading, whereby the male identity of the Guru is imagined to be ontologically complete. However, if the Sikh Gurus within their writings continuously stress the fact that “the doer has innumerable forms, O Nanak,” then why does the imagery of a masculine God dominate Sikh historiography? Singh’s critique of the practice of male idolatry within the interpretive practice of Sikh theology resonates with the work of several other scholars in Western philosophy of religious studies, such as Grace Jantzen, Naomi Goldenberg, and Luce Irigaray, to name a few.

For example, Grace Jantzen, in her book *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, identifies how within Christian theism, “theologians don’t care if God exists, what matters is that *the concept* of the divine exists” (*emphasis mine*). These concepts of God are not natural but socially constructed (which Singh also points to within the construction of Sikh theology). Where specific human “reason, grammar, structure of language, syntactical laws” are used in the service of a specific belief-systems that exclude certain “other” processes of life from religious imaginary (Jantzen 1999: 97). These belief-systems often trap the notion of the “divine” within a static body, such as a male or female divine, without acknowledging the process of alterity within them. These androcentric views of Sikh history and culture are but a product of colonial imposition and the self-representation of the West through its modern discourse of “religion.”

However, by replacing the male interpretive practice with the feminine, one only replaces one form of representation with another without highlighting the co-constructed relationship between the two categories, namely, religion and sexual/gendered identity, by virtue of their regulation and definition of each other. Naomi Goldenberg, in her essay “Queer Theory Meets Critical Religion,” identifies this problem and highlights the need to challenge the naturalness of the two categories. She states as follows:

It is very possible that the linguistic and social institutions that are now identified as “religions” are recognizable historically and culturally because of their regulation and standardization of sex and gender. Likewise, what is understood to be sexuality might be genealogically and ideologically bound to what has been thought about religion. Sexuality and religion thus could well be discursive products of each other. Thus, if critical analysis of both religion and sexuality continues, the categories will continue to intersect, collide, and displace each other.

Goldenberg questions the feminist theological practice and urges queer and feminist theorists to interrogate the category of religion alongside its very reliance on specific sexual and gendered ideals that help buttress its various constructions. This process of critique will not only begin to expose the constructed nature of religious ideologies but also its foundational ontotheological assumptions that separates the self, God, and the world into distinct categories, using the nameable “I”-identities.

By giving primacy to human self-consciousness and thought (thanks to the dominance of Protestant theology), the practice of naming identities became a universal phenomenon. So much so that Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair mentions that once identity is posited as an “ideal relationship between thought and object,” it becomes the “regime of representation” that assumes “unhindered translatability” across points of difference and cultures (Mandair 2017: 175). Due to Western colonial translational practices, Anglo-Christian ideals became the dominant mode of translation and understanding of Sikh subjectivity. As a result of these translation practices, the experiences of the Sikh Gurus came to be represented through secular ideals of self-consciousness that differentiated their social life from their religious, their internal from their external self, and the sacred from the profane experiences of gender transgression.

However, if gender is the self-possessive act of naming that is inflected with the *theo*-cultural ideals of the local and colonial times, how can gender be understood and utilized within Sikh philosophy inspired by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus? While this is not an easy question to answer in the limited space available here, it is nevertheless an urgent one to pursue. Through the writings of the Sikhs Gurus, one can glean that the Gurus seem to possess an ambiguous sense of self and gender and a sense of consciousness that was not separate from the divine or the world. The Sikh Gurus’ experience of the world is not through their own possessive sense of the self as the “I,” or the doer, but rather through a relinquished sense of self, or submission, to the truth of the divine imperative (or the *hukam*). Therefore, they begin to offer a different understanding of the self that is not of an autonomous being but one that is inseparable from the world and the divine. Here, the concept of *nirgun-sargun* become important and is also elaborated in greater detail by South Asian studies scholars (Hawley 1995 and Mandair 2013).

The *Guru Granth Sahib*, the foundational Sikh scripture, begins with the *mool mantar*, which is written by the first master of the Sikh tradition. The *mool mantar* defines the essence of Sikh philosophy, which is repeated in multiple variations across the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *mool mantar* roughly translates to the following:

One, who manifests as word, is true in name, is the creative being, is without fear, is without enmity, whose form is infinite, is unborn, is self-existent, through the grace of the guru.

According to Guru Nanak, if *nam* as the infinite word is true, then what is false? I would argue that the name(s) one gives to the self or to one’s self-attachments are false. These names are acts of one’s ego-mind that “calculates, evaluates, measures” and identifies itself in opposition to the world (Mandair 2013). Use of pronouns and identities are but a few examples of self-naming practices that one prescribes to unify the self into a neat subjective position, only to then differentiate itself from its “other.” Here I am demonstrating, more broadly, the uses of the “not-I” that are often neglected within the secular conventions of naming. This, however, seems to be changing within non-binary and trans-identifying communities. Many resist the act of identifying themselves using pronouns such as “he” or “she” and choose to use the non-aspirational “they.” Such an act of an unnamable assemblage of oneself is like the ways in which Sikh Gurus were transgressing gender conventions within the Sikh text. Both of which disrupt the self-possessive act of naming by opening oneself to the world.

These practices of self-naming are understood by the Gurus as acts of falsehood or dirt (*kūṛai*) that consolidates and separates the self from the world and its divine essence. It is important to note that the act of naming was prevalent even within the local cultural practices at the time of the Gurus that used specific rituals and ceremonies to mark their difference. However, these cultural differences were significantly widened by the colonial process of religion-making and their respective

ethno-nationalists' modes of identity. Therefore, the Sikh Gurus speak from the perspective of someone who has come to a conscious awareness of this absolute in its creative force, as part of the self *and* the creative infinite. So much so that the Gurus are unable to speak as themselves but always in relation to this infinite truth that is the doer: "Follow the divine will and command, from the first written out, O Nanak."

The later verses within *Japji* and the *Guru Granth* are but an iteration of the *mool mantar*. They are there to remind our ego-mind to let go of its innumerable attempts to self-identify and name.

The divine command is the source of all forms; the divine command cannot be spoken of or defined.

The divine command is the source of all creatures and by the divine command greatness is received.

By the divine command those with greatness are made low; by the divine command both sorrows and joys are received.

By the divine command some receive honorary favors, by divine command some must forever revolve.

All is within the divine command; nothing exists outside of it.

Nanak, one who grasps the nature of the divine command finds their ego-sense to be mute.

These early stanzas of the *Japji Sahib* are useful to demonstrate the foundational themes within Sikh philosophy that act as scaffolding for the later works of the Sikh Gurus and their play on gender and sexuality.

Sikh Gurus' writings take the issue of gender construction beyond the quagmire effect of secularist thought that has restricted the conversation on gender and sexuality either around biological determinism (nature) or social construction (nurture). For Sikh Gurus, the play of gender is one of divine command and not an act of self or social making. Guru Nanak in Raag Maru writes, "You yourself are the male and the female. You are the moves and the players. You stage the drama in the world and then evaluate the players" (GGS 1020).

Guru Nanak speaks of the divine command as the embodied force both within the male and the female body. This command is unique to the two players. It then enacts their play and evaluates the players. To everyday readers who perform their gender in society with fixated roles for male and female actors, Guru Nanak's philosophy offers a place of divine intervention through affective relief. In other words, gender is no longer bound to secular ideals of rational thought from which the divine or the moment of alterity is absent; instead it becomes its active site of intervention. This is evident in innumerable prose written by various Gurus within *Guru Granth Sahib*.

For example, Guru Amar Das (the third Sikh Guru) writes in Raag Gauri:

Without my *pir* (or beloved) I am without honor.

Without my beloved how can I live, oh mother?

Without my beloved, no sleep comes, and no clothes adorn my body.

Only that dress suits me that pleases my beloved *pir*.

Guru's teachings are brought to my consciousness.

I forever remain a happy bride when I serve the true Guru (*satgur*) by embodying the Guru.

Through the Guru's words, my beloved ravishes in the *naam* imbued within the world.

Oh Nanak, take delight in the name of the beloved with innumerable qualities (GGS 244).

The words that are uttered by the lips of a seemingly male body suddenly betray his male identity. Through the feminine temper, Guru Amar Das sings in Raag Gauri, where the Guru is enthralled by the love of the *pir* and the pining desire to be forever the bride of the True Guru. The masculinity

of the Guru is interrupted by the erotic excess of the desire that is often characterized as being feminine; this signals a renewed identity that is repeatedly transgressive. Not only does the Guru adopt the consciousness of the bride but later also as Nanak, who too is affixed by a similar sense of affect and sensibility as the bride. Therefore, Guru Amar Das experiences the affect of the bride in one instance and Guru Nanak in another. As readers, our own rational mind loses its ground to this sudden onset of the Guru's affective (dis)location. The Guru transcends a specific subject position and is in a perpetual state of connection with the world through the mediation of the *nam* and not the *self*-conscious address that would return him to himself as an act of ontological finality. The Guru's acute awareness of the infinite workings of *nam* silences his own self-conscious desire to identify himself, separated from this infinite oneness. The Guru reminds themselves that they must take delight in *nam* that escapes objectivity yet is innumerable in qualities. Making this movement of languages, desires, and bodies a rather vexed affair for our own rational mind to comprehend, label, and set in place as identity. This reveals the presence of time that runs alongside but counter to *kal* (objective time) as a creative moment (*akal*), where the linearity of objective standpoint is interrupted by the sheer excess of affective relations through ego-loss. *Kal* and *akal* represent two ontologically different orders of time, therefore two modes of consciousness – one that gravitates towards individualism and the other towards self-loss (Mandair 2022: 17).

A similar sentiment is expressed by Navdeep Mandair in his article "(En)Gendered Sikhism: The iconolatry of manliness in the making of the Sikh identity," which provides a close analysis of (the fifth) Guru Arjan's collection of writings in *Shabad Hazare*. In Mandair's translation of the text (as shown in the next section), the readers are asked to renounce their rational judgment of secular ethics that would allow them to presume this simply to be an act of "spiritual" meditation. Instead, he argues that "this prosaic analysis is undercut by the visceral excess of the Guru's anguished plea, which spills over the somber measures regulating the encounter with 'God' and returns again to the capricious register of human intercourse" (Mandair 2005: 41).

My body is immersed in the pleasures of illusion, an attire colored by greed,

My beloved does not love this dress, how then will this woman enter her lover's bed?

In the *shabad* cited here, the Guru's affect and speech defy their carnal identity by expressing themselves as a woman, leaving the readers in utter confusion over the ontological truth of their gendered and sexual identity. While the Gurus experience the transitive movement of their bodies, desires, affect, and subjectivities as their embodied command (*hukam*), the readers on the other hand continue to isolate these experiences into specific subjective positions, by proclaiming them to be "theological visions," "spiritual meditations," "a feminine-divine energy," "maternal perspectives," or "male-dominated narratives" (Singh 2005; Mandair 2005; Jakobsh 2003). These processes of categorization continue to frame the Gurus' experience through the devices of Western secularism by severing the links between the Guru's religious and social life.

Considering the previous discussion, it is possible to see how and why the dominant trend in Western scholarship has been to objectify and isolate the experientially based expressions of the Sikh Gurus not only by constructing them as self-conscious individual subjects with a specific gendered identity but also their speech as acts of "spiritual devotion." By drawing on secular ideals that separate religion from the secular, spiritual from the political, internal from the external, male from female, sacred from the profane, self from the divine and the world, an individualizing rationality and self-consciousness remains at the heart of subject-making and identity. Sikh scholars also seem to demonstrate secular anxiety when representing non-Western religions that seem to get too close to being political or outside the realm of the so-called "religious." Accordingly, under the gaze of

secular discourse, the transitive nature of Sikh subjectivity is quickly made into an object of human reason, where self-consciousness is privileged over the corporal excess of the Guru's body. They are then entrapped within the identity framework of religious practice.

Sikh and feminist scholarship, however, must reckon with the realm of the impersonal (non-I) and silence the ego-mediated truth-claims to representation by acknowledging divinity within abstracted ways of life. Within Western philosophical discourse, scholars such as Grace Jantzen, along with other French feminist philosophers of religion and post-structuralism, have critiqued the idea of a stable subject or body. They have argued that our embodied experience of race, gender, sexuality, desire, unconscious, able/dis-ability are central to the destabilizing aspects of our subjectivity. Scholars working with diaspora and nomadic theory speak of the fragmentation of our body through the "ontology of becoming," where the self is made and remade with the movement of time and complex flows of heterogeneous relationships with human and non-human life (Braidotti 1994; Bakare-Yusuf 2008; Deleuze and Guattari 2013). Collectively, scholars within diasporic theory, nomadic theory, women of color feminism, and queer and trans of color critique have consistently undermined the unequivocal notion of the self as an autonomous individual, by taking into account our relations with the unconscious and fantasies (Goldenberg 1980; Rodriguez 2014), locations (Tellis and Bala 2015; Bakare-Yusuf 2008; Ahmed 2006), non-humans (Barker 2017), memory and non-linear time (Manalansan 2003; Gopinath 2018), beliefs (Carrette 1999), desires (Munoz 1999; Eng 2010; Gopinath 2018; Musser 2018), and racialization (Eng 2010; Ferguson 2004).

Here I am also compelled to evoke passages from William Connolly's book *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. In his analysis of the secular discourse, he attempts to show how an engagement with the so-called "religious" traditions that incorporate affective registers of existence, which are otherwise lost to the domain of the personal, can be a valuable resource for a generative revision of secular thinking. He implores the need to take

the visceral register of inter/subjectivity seriously . . . (as) a host of historically contingent routines, traumas, joys, and conversion experiences leave imprints upon the visceral registers of thinking and judgment, and these thought-imbued, often intersubjective intensities also exert efforts on linguistically refined patterns of discourse and judgment.

(Connolly 2000: 9)

Not only does he want us to rethink "thinking" differently but to also re-territorialize affective relations alongside cognitive ways of being in the world. Mandair understands these immaterial encounters to be critical in the process of creating a time-conscious subjectivity that is heterogeneous and internally diverse in nature (*akal*), as opposed to a time-consciousness that reduces time and events to representable points in place (*kal*) (17). This acknowledgement of the deeper visceral relations and movement between bodies can help expand our understanding and appreciation of a community and its subjective position that goes beyond a rational quest for identity. Connolly writes, "Elaboration of an expansive pluralism appropriate to the contemporary requires cultural investments in the visceral register of subject and intersubjectivity" (Connolly 2000: 24). In other words, by investing in the lived experience of the Sikhs in the current and historical times, we begin to value the various domains of the social and the immaterial that make up their entangled forms of embodiments and intersubjective dispositions, instincts, desires, rituals, and enactments that extend beyond our normative understanding of social life.

These multiple zones of contact, namely, the social, affective, unconscious, material, and the immaterial form the "ontology of our becoming," where complex flows of conscious and unconscious interactions with the world continuously de-territorialize us and disrupt our stable subject positions

and identity, as Sikh-Americans, male-female, human-nonhumans, etc. (Braidotti 2011). By abandoning the secular ethics that compel us to articulate ourselves through a specific language-identity framework (“I am . . .”), Sikhs can open the possibility of acknowledging sites of alterity, interconnectedness, and becoming that is not mediated by the ego-I or performative of a specific subject position. This radical orientation of our consciousness to the processes of erasure of the “I” from the “other” is an act of partaking in a form of language and ethics that holds the two together in multiplicity and as divine oneness. The Sikh philosophical and feminist practice is, therefore, tasked with the objective to hold together the shifting states of our bodies, affect, locations, conscious and unconscious selves at times when Western secular liberal discourse compel us to represent a stable Sikh identity (i.e., woman) that is gender normative over a self-differentiated, abstracted, or a dis-identifying one (Muñoz 1999).

The Sikh Gurus and the textual embodiment of their teaching provide us with a frame of language that breaks our reliance on recognition-based thinking that differentiates and otherizes based on I-identities. Instead, their language makes improbable connections viable in their messy, intersubjective existence and desires. Sikh philosophy gives everyday lived encounters a divine essence through conceptual frameworks, such as *hukam* (divine imperative or command), *akal-murat* (untimely or creative forms), and *shabad-guru* (the word as Guru), which break our moral hold on life that gives primacy to human rationality and self-sovereignty. These concepts give primacy to the divine imperative within life instead of human rationality and its control over life.

So long as we continue to uphold our moral obligations towards heteronormativity, gender straightness, and a culture of masculine integrity within Sikhism, we can neither orient our mind and bodies to the poetic verses of the Sikh Gurus, nor can we submit to the principles of the *hukam*. And if we believe in the sovereignty of the *shabad-guru* or Sikh thought over the sovereignty of our own rationality, then it must surrender to the divine imperative within the transitive lived experiences of Sikh and queer subjectivities. These acts of self-surrendering to the principles of *hukam* can connect us to the world in new and creative ways in a manner that does not isolate the pain and suffering of others but moves us in a state of affective relation with them. This includes making central within the Sikh world of the pain and invisibility of gendered and sexual difference, caste violence, racialization, class marginalization, ageism, and dis-abling experiences of Sikh within the community, the colonial experiences of the indigenous communities, and the race and gendered exploitation of Blacks, Latina Americans, Palestinians, Muslims, Rohingyas, and other countless oppressed groups from around the world. Their pain must move us in a direction that liberates us, even momentarily, from our own debilitated position as subjects to the hegemony of the state, ethno-religious structures, and other ego-mediated sovereignties.

According to Guru Nanak, if the cure to egocentrism lies within ego itself, then our expanded relations with the world – its innumerable life-forms, plurality of cultures, languages and intensities of desires, affect and relations – can help redefine Sikh identity through its internal plurality and relations with the multiplicity of bodies, sexualities, ethnicities, religions, beliefs, and political systems. The task for Sikh feminism and the Sikh world, more generally, is then to learn to live with this internal diversity in a manner that does not revert to a language of identification and difference, but one that is generative of multiple subjectivities as part of *Sikhi*’s innate pluralistic and transitive ethos that follows Guru Nanak’s conception of the divine oneness.

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18

DEATH AND DYING

Within the *Guru Granth Sahib*

Balbinder Singh Bhogal

Introduction

“How is it that the distinction between subject and object, between me and things, is so crucially dependent on life and death? . . . Why is death the harbinger and index of the thing-world, and how can it be, then, that death awakens life in things?” Michael Taussig’s (2001: 305) otherwise perceptive questions curiously miss a standard Indic understanding: that the distinction between things created by death occurs because death is time (*kaal* means both), and clearly it is this temporal movement that reveals how that which was animate becomes inanimate. Thus, in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGS), there is One Process (*Ik-Oankaar*) that operates through two major forms of becoming: the “invisible” (*nirgun, akal muurati, man*), and the “visible” (*sargun, muurati, tan*). These constitute two modes of existential being and becoming respectively: *Time/Death as Word* (remembering of World as Word), and *Time/Death as World* (forgetting of World as Word). The truth of the latter is that *everything dies*; the truth of the former is that *nothing dies*. Let’s take each in turn.

DEATH AS WORLD: EVERYONE DIES

Why such false pride? Know this world is a dream.

Nanak proclaims this truth: none of this is yours.

Such pride in the body! it will perish in an instant, my friend.

(GGS 1428)

You are a bundle of bones filled with excrement wrapped in skin; producing an awful stench! . . . Death is not far away!

(GGS 1124)

When time/death frame the world, beings are perishable. Guru Ram Das employs the pan-Indic image of *Kaal* (Time/Death) as a demon that captures all beings in its mouth (GGS 169). Life is therefore temporary and ephemeral; it occurs within the context of an absolute fate. Guru Arjan writes “mountains, trees, earth, sky and stars”; “sun and moon”; “wind, water and fire”; scriptures (“shastras, simritis, vedas”); “shrines, temples, sacrificial offerings”; “castes, classes, Muslims, Hindus, all animals species”; the “entire world and visible universe,” including “the realms of the

gods” (Indra, Braham, Siva) – all forms of existence shall pass away (GGS 237). In this regard life and death (*janam-maran*) are not two things that are opposed but one process of coming and going (*aavan-jaavan*), a mere “play” (*khelu*) that the One makes (GGS 294): “No one can stop anyone from coming; how could anyone stop anyone from going? . . . The buckets on the chain of the water wheel rotate: one empties out to fill another” (GGS 1329: 474, 1157). The Gurus give a numerical shorthand to this endless (samsaric/karmic) cycle of “8.4 million incarnations” (*lakh cauraasihi*), a chain of conditioned lives in which we are lost wandering and begging (GGS 433). Though these may seem many, each one is a mere instant, because “each and every moment, one’s life passes away, like water from a cracked pitcher” (GGS 726). Life is short, and the march of time halts for no one (GGS 23).

Life is framed by impermanence, where “the whole world is caught in the noose of Death, and all are bound by its chains” (GGS 433). Its tragicomic nature is not missed: “Death hovers over his head, laughing, but the beast does not recognize it. Entangled in conflict, pleasure and egotism, he does not even think of death” (GGS 809). But a further anxiety is noted: even if we remember death, we cannot know when it will occur, for “Death does not ask the time; it does not ask the date or the day of the week” (GGS 1244; 660). This single process can be summed up thus: birth sanctions death as death permits life. Yet this is not only processual but also suggests a fundamental interpenetration:

Drop is in the ocean; the ocean is in the drop . . .

Night is in the day; the day is in the night – as for hot and cold . . .

Female is in the male, the male is in the female – understand this, Braham – realized being!

Meditation is in music, knowledge is in meditation – become Saint (Gurmukh), and narrate the

Indescribable.

Light is in mind; mind is in the Light – the Guru brings the five senses together like brothers.

(GGS 878)

In this interpenetrating process Guru Nanak sings: “The One takes away and the One gives; I have heard of no other” (GGS 433). Not only do beings come and go, so does the world (GGS 138) and God; though beyond this coming and going is simultaneously inseparable from it because of such interpenetration (GGS 125).

But the key delusion of the Manmukh (egoist) is the forgetting of one’s true nature as soul (*aatam*) and light (*jot*) that leads one to falsely identify with the body. As already noted, all bodies die, hence bondage to suffering is the inevitable consequence of this ignorant identification. Thus, the Gurus bring into view the real topic concerning death: not the body’s ephemeral nature, but the mind’s false identification. Guru Arjan sings, “All that is seen is an illusion” (GGS 1083). “Do not be deluded by appearance you fool. This forms a false attachment to the (changing) expanse (of the world)” (GGS 1077). Guru Nanak observes, “The world is a dream – like a magician’s deceiving tricks, one is ruined by falsehood and egotism” (GGS 581). Even “empires of the earth are like walls of sand” (GGS 1352). Guru Nanak sings that “we are like deer caught in a trap; we suffer terrible agony – continually crying out in pain.” But still we don’t realize that “flowers, wealth and youthful beauty are guests for only four days” and that “my playful friends have fallen asleep in the graveyard” (GGS 23).

It is this delusory, soporific attachment (inherent and unavoidable) that drives beings to forget death’s noose tighten around their necks as each moment passes. Integral to this ephemeral illusion

is *haumai*, which on the cosmic scale is an individuating principle of the One (i.e., in and as the Many), and on the personal, human level, forms the ego-mind-self.

Egotism (*haumai*) was installed into the illusion (*maaiiaa/Maya*).

The egoist (Manmukh), deluded, loses his honor.

But one who becomes selfless (Gurmukh) is absorbed in the Name, remaining immersed in the

True One.

(GGS 1044)

Manmukh (ego-directed) and Gurmukh (Guru-directed) represent the two existential modes of becoming noted above. The former is attached to many names and forms (time/death as world) the latter is focused on the one unnamable Name (time/death as Word). What then is to be done to exceed this emotional trap of attachment?

In a very human voice, the GGS notes how death is always already a part of life: “People say it is good to live forever; but without dying there is no life” (GGS 655). Death is already our fate (*maranu likhaai*) when we are born, but still, we forget this and strive to gather riches in life. Eventually, however, we do notice that “some have already gone” and that the fire of death is coming closer. And in the face of that fire, no family or friend can help; only the Name can be the support there (GGS 876). Indeed, “loving attachment to mother, father, brother, child, wife is all deception”; that is to say, “without Hari [God] who is the support of the mind?” (GGS 1253). Before we can turn to Hari (Guru, Word, and the Name), a veil has to be removed: “When the veil (of illusion) is removed, then I come to see You” (GGS 1141). So for the Gurus, the acceptance of death is not the end of the story – for whilst all pass away, certain things remain. “Everyone dies” is a half-truth: *everybody* dies, but what about the soul/mind? Uprooting this false identification with the body unlocks a new relation to the mind that turns life upside down: now, no one dies; death itself becomes the illusion.

Before explaining this second truth, I would like to return to Taussig as an emblematic specter of the enlightened West for whom “everyone dies” is not only an apothegm but a secular axiom given “the death of God.” Citing the work of Robert Hertz’s notion of the doubleness of death in pre-modern societies (involving two burials – the corpse first, then much later the spirit with great festivity), Taussig summarizes, “First you suffer loss. Chaos reigns. Then comes the reward. Peace is established. Life triumphs once more over death and harmony reigns” (2001: 307). But this harmony does not last, as he notes this “inclusion of the dead in human societies . . . is a vexed state of affairs, so vexed, in fact, that it amounts to a fundamental flaw running through the core of society.” Despite the two funerals and annual mourning, the dead spirits refuse to be appeased so easily and packaged away so neatly. In the pre-modern world, death is inseparable from life – the spirits of the dead live among us and can intervene at any moment, and so have to be constantly appeased. So Taussig asks, “What if they are uncontainable?” What if they refuse to disappear – noting how they can invade at any time, in any place, triggered by the most arbitrary of things. Indeed, citing the work of Elias Canetti – who argues that the dead spirits form “the invisible crowds” that give birth to all religions – Taussig notes that this seemingly fundamental flaw actually changed with advent of the Enlightenment and its “disenchantment” of the (pre-modern) world, where they retreat into the unconscious (2001: 308–310). Nevertheless, beyond Freud’s unconscious, Taussig argues, the dead spirits’ uncontainability resurfaces even in modernity:

That poetry is forced to fill this vacuum, and that poetry does this because it is the most mimetically nuanced form of verbal representation and expression there is. . . . Poetry will

crisscross the division between the living and the dead creating thereby a *state of living-death* that will bring the poet into full flood and language into its mimetic birthright.

(2001: 310)

In short, Taussig's work highlights the limitations of post-religious modern secular thinkers, as being constrained by the assumption that God, the spirits, and the spiritual self can be displaced by the thinking self alone.

Given the Gurus' notion of being *dead-while-yet-alive* (*jivat-maraĩ*), and dying through the Word (*shabadi maraĩ*), as well as the musical and poetic structure of the GGS, there is much resonance with Sikh teachings here. Poetry's revelatory voice acts as an interpretive bridge not only between the living and the dead but between secular Western subjectivity and the GGS's poetic verse.

DEATH AS WORD: NO-ONE DIES

Those who forget the Name are already dead and continue to die [samsaric cycle].
They do not taste Hari's [God's] nectar; but sink into excrement.

(GGS 429)

Death is not dependent on the body but rests upon remembering or forgetting God's Name: "saying it, I live; forgetting it I die" (GGS 9). When the world of time/death is perceived as the Word that destroys false identification and dualistic thinking, then beings become imperishable:

What is that place which never perishes?

What is that Word (*shabad*) by which dualistic thinking (*duramati*) is removed? . . .

Effortlessness, praise, devotion, wisdom, essence of reality,
eternal bliss and the Imperishable are all obtained in that true place.

There in the company of the holy His qualities are sung with love.

There, in this city of fearlessness, He always dwells.

There is no fear, doubt, suffering nor anxiety there.

There is no coming nor going, and no death there.

There is eternal bliss and unstruck (music) there.

The devotees dwell there, with *kirtan* as their support . . .

That Imperishable place is obtained . . .

(GGS 237)

Thus, within the perishable (body) there is the imperishable (soul/mind), prompting the religious journey of remembering (psychosomatically) the mind merged in the divine before and beyond its attachment to the body's appearance, "so that my mind might dance in true bliss" (GGS 169). And "he alone is a Guru, he alone is a Sikh, O brother, whose light merges with the Light" (GGS 602). Here we enter the transformative realm of mystical union – that overcomes the walls of ego, death, duality, and the dream.

Death/Bondage: Ego

This *maaiāa*, by which Hari [God] is forgotten, gives rise to infatuation/attachment (*mohu*) and the

love of duality (*bhaau duujāa*).

(GGS 921)

The unfettered mind in forgetting becomes veiled and colonized by the ego (*haumai*, *ahankaar*) through the ego's love of another. The disease of duality (*dubidhaa*) "creates the desiring of *maai*" (GGS 1153). But this willful ego drive (*haumai*) can be countered by the Word (*shabad*), Name (*naam*), and God's Will/Order (*hukam*). In fact, ego and Name/Word/Guru form an oppositional structure and dialectic:

Haumai and *Naam* are in conflictual tension (*virodhu*); the two do not dwell in the same place . . .

If you accept *hukam*, then you will meet Hari [God]; only then will *haumai* depart from within.

(GGS 560)

This hymn states further that *haumai* (I-mind) is reformed by meeting the True Guru, practicing the truth, and serving the True One. This reformation of the mind is possible because we are processual beings rather than fixed substances, whose being is formed by actions (reaping what we sow). This causal process is sanctioned by unwritten and unwritable laws (*hukam*) that none can transgress without consequence: "*Haumai* exists by *hukam*; we wander according to what we have done./*Haumai* is a chronic disease, but the cure also lies within it" (GGS 466). By acting in accordance with ego desires and fears (*haumai*), in opposition to the intelligent orders of bodies and their environments (*hukam*) – for "there is One Awareness (*ekaa surati*) among all created beings; none have been created without this awareness" (GGS 24) – humans nevertheless generate their own isolated fantasies:

The mind is engrossed in lust, anger, greed and infatuation . . .

Chasing pleasure avoiding pain, one is born only to die again . . .

The world is drowning in an ocean of fire/desire.

(GGS 804)

Haumai must be disciplined and reformed to re-member that one awareness (unconcealed in animals and concealed in humans). The dualistic mind objectifies the world for its own consumption. But that "false mind is hunted by the God of Death (*jam*)" (GGS 935), and "when Jam comes and grabs you by the hair knocking you down, on that day, you will be powerless" (GGS 1106). Deep down, we know this but do not perceive our fear of death as the generator of our illusory world. We thus exist in compulsively conditioned cycles of habituated existence (*maya*). Thus, freedom from *maya* is actually freedom from the fear of death, enacting a release from the prism of sensory addictions towards an awareness of mental states and their liberating potentials. Further, these meditative capacities point towards a true death. Bhagat Kabir sings, "Kabir, the world is dying – dying to death, but no one knows how to truly die. Whoever dies, let him die such a death that he does not have to die again" (GGS 555). That is to say, one has to (mentally) die before one (physically) dies, such that when one (physically) dies, one does not actually die again. Instead, the option arises to kill death itself (i.e., to correctly perceive it as an illusion built on false identification and attachment that reduces the self to egoic becoming). Our fear of physical death is the result of forgetting our spiritual/samadhic mind. In fact, "death would not be called bad, O people, if one knew how to die" (GGS 579). Guru Amar Das comments on Kabir's hymn:

What do I know? How will I die? What sort of death will it be?

If I do not forget the Master from my mind, then death will be easy.

The world is terrified by death; everyone desires life.
By Guru's grace, one who dies-while-yet-alive (*jīvat-marai*) understands *hukam*.
O Nanak, one who dies such a death, lives forever.

(GGS 555)

Everybody dies, but no one self has to die. Indeed, immortality describes our true nature. However, before we get to the ideal of *jīvat-marai*, we need to acknowledge a pivotal line here that implicitly states what becomes explicit in many other hymns: to access the successful death, to remain dead-while-alive (i.e., attuned to *hukam*), and to live forever, one has to engage a *reversal* of orientations such as these: "People make many efforts to secure pleasure; no one makes efforts for pain" (GGS 1428) and "everyone begs for a long life, no-one wishes to die" (GGS 63). Rather than be fearful of death and desirous of life, what would it mean to be fearful of life and desirous of death? If the ego is formed by grasping pleasure over pain (which is impossible to secure), then reversing this delusional subjectivity to prefer suffering over happiness (letting go, giving) may cause a qualitative transformation in the mind. When one selfishly hankers for pleasure (*sukh*) over pain (*dukh*), one resides in a mode of forgetting (*visarai*) called *haumai*, but when one reverses this and unselfishly hankers for *dukh* over *sukh* one begins to approach the mode of remembering (*simaran*) attuned to *hukam*. (These are the two existential modes of becoming: Manmukh and Gurmukh, respectively.) Then as Kabir sings "death which terrifies the world, fills my mind with bliss; for it is only in that death perfect supreme bliss is obtained"; this is not the death of the body, but of the ego-mind. That is, "when you are in love with the One, duality and otherness depart" (GGS 1365). This reconceptualization of death is echoed in Guru Nanak's song:

Understand, O wise one, who has died.
body, quarrelling and ego have died,
but the One who sees (*dekhanahaar*) does not die . . .
I have not died – my affliction (*balaai*) has died.
The One who remains absorbed pervading all does not die.
Says Nanak, the Guru has revealed Brahman [the Absolute] to me,
and now I see that there is no such thing as birth or death.

(GGS 152)

Now, "no one dies; no one is capable of dying" (GGS 885), like energy "nothing is born and nothing dies" (GGS 281). The reversal from *sukh* to *dukh* that restrains the "wandering" mind (*mana paradesiiaa*) demands that we wake up from the dream of *haumaic* existence (full of false identifications) (GGS 726–727) and consciously re-connect with the Primal Void (*sunni samaaniaa*) by which God remains "awake in each and every heart" (GGS 857).

Death/liberation: saint

The GGS employs several key terms (Primal Void, Essence-less Absorption, Nirvana, as well as Guru, Word, and Name) that describe a praxis that can instigate this reversal:

Without the Guru liberation is not attained nor is dualistic *maaiiaa* overcome . . .
Without love, there is no devotion; without the Word, no one finds acceptance.
Through the Word, egotism is conquered, and the illusion of *maaiiaa* is dispelled.
The Gurmukh obtains the Treasure of the Name naturally and effortlessly (*sahaji subhaai*).

(GGS 67)

The GGS's positing of an alternative epistemic perception of nonduality is expressed in terms of merging/reversing the mind with the Word. At the outset it is important to understand that this is not however a merger of two equal parts. Rather, merger is asymmetrical and understood largely by three tropes: bhaktic, yogic, and tantric. In bhakti (*bhagati*), it is the union of lovers but not as equals; the devotee seeks to reach God's Door (*dar*) or enters God's Court (*darbaar*, *daragah*) to gain His vision (*darasan*), and the bride (*sohaagani*) yearns for her absent Husband (God). The yogic trope proffers a nondual "fourth state" (*chauta-pad*, *turiyaa*, *nirbaanii-pad*, *sunnsamaadh*, *Purukh/purusha*) that, whilst underlying the other three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, transcends the three strands/forces of nature (*prakriti's rajas, sattva, and tamas*). Finally, in a tantric grammar (*siva-sakti*, *ira-pingula-sukhmana* etc.) the extrasensory Tenth Door (*dasam duaar*) is to be reached beyond the nine sensory apertures of the human body. In all cases the metaphor of death operates to signal the asymmetry through a reversal: from separation (*viraha*, *vijog*) to union (*sanjog*), from the bride's home of birth to her home of marriage, from nine doors to the tenth door, from *prakriti* to *Purakh*, from time/death (*kaal*) to the Timeless/Deathless (*Akaal*). This union marks the death of the dualistic consciousness to a new aliveness in nondual awareness beyond subject and object perception: the I-mind (*haumai*) is "erased," "integrated," "reformed" in favor of the Absolute Other, the pure mind always already latent. Thus, palimpsestic layers of ill deeds, ignorance, and habituated attachments accrued over many lifetimes are thereby cleansed: "Annihilate the three qualities, engage the Fourth State: this is unparalleled devotion" (GGS 908).

Thus, whichever of the three grammars is used to enact this reversal, the *haumai-maaiiaa-dubidhaa* complex has to die (i.e., be returned to its natural – *sahaj* – state). This integrative shift from *haumai* to *hukam*, via *naam*, *shabad*, and *Guru* is the keynote theme of the GGS.

Seizing the source, the mind is delighted.
He who knows this secret understands his own mind.
No one should delay in uniting (*milataa*) his mind.

(GGS 342)

Killing the mind (*manu maare*), desiring dies.
Without dying, how can one find Hari?
Who knows the medicine that kills the mind?
That person understands, whose mind dies through the Word . . .
The mind is drunk like a rutting elephant.
The Guru's striking rod restores it back to life/sobriety . . .
They abandon egotism (*haumai*) and disorder (*vikaar*) from within . . .
O Nanak, through the Guru's teaching he recognizes the Name.

(GGS 159)

The mind is twofold: untouched by ego (natural) and touched by ego (fabricated). The aim therefore is to kill the latter to return to the former. This is less an erasure than a reformation, a coming home rather than a wholesale reinvention. The ego after all contains its own cure: "O Nanak, through the mind the mind is satisfied, and then nothing comes and goes" (GGS 513). It is precisely this effortless ease (*sahaj*) that counters a model of Western subjectivity wherein thinking forms the ground of individuated being.

Evolved Human (*Gurmukh*)

The Fourth State (*chautaa-pad*) is not only the primordial *state* that exists before creation and that persists throughout creation unchanged, it is also futural in terms of an evolutionary *stage*. First the One creates itself; then duality; third, the three-phased *maaiāa*; and finally the highest and fourth stage of development, the *Gurmukh*: the saint who has conquered his mind (GGS 113). The goal is not to abandon the world in ascetic retreat but to develop it to the extent of the saintly society (*sat-*, *saadh-*, *sangat*, *sant-sabha*). This transformation-cum-evolution begins with self-understanding through psychological reform via the Guru:

Through the mystical experience (*parachai*) granted by the Guru, he (*Gurmukh*) is not consumed

by death . . .

One who enters in the Fourth State (*chauthai*) overcomes death . . .

Manmukhs err, compelled to come and go . . .

He (*Gurmukh*) recognizes his own self, when he finds the True Guru . . .

(GGS 840)

Then, Guru Nanak sings: “what can the wretched cycle of birth and death say to the one who is dead-while-alive having killed his mind?” (GGS 907). This evolved human, according to Guru Tegh Bahadur, is untouched by pleasure, pain, greed, attachment and pride. He does not distinguish between praise and blame, gold and iron, friend and enemy. He neither makes others fear him, nor does he fear anyone. Such a being is rare (GGS 1427). But as Guru Ram Das notes: “that moment when I forget my Master (*suaamii*) is precisely the moment my soul (*jiio*) dies” (GGS 562). Life and death occur each moment of existential awareness: in forgetting or remembering that One. Guru Amar Das sings: “The body becomes golden when the Word is its Husband” (GGS 1058). In comparison then, the mere death of the body is almost negligible. Hence, the Sikh teaching not to mourn the passing of the body, but to celebrate the reunion with the divine mind. For example, Baba Sundar relates Guru Amar Das’s view to “Let no one weep for me after I am gone” rather one should “sing Kirtan in (the state of) Nirvana” (GGS 923).

Re-Forming Mind

What leads people to one samsaric death after another? The simple answer noted previously is their inability to enact a transformative reversal – one that will lead to liberation in life (*jiivan-mukat*) as being dead-while-alive (*jiivat-marai*). Most are in love with *maya* (objects that appear as knowable) and thus remain asleep in their attachments to nameable things. Only a rare few are blessed by remaining awake and aware, attuned to the unnamable (Name) – with radiant faces (*mukha uujala*) and a bright/pure/immaculate mind (*niramal ciit*) (GGS 375). Guru Nanak sings about this necessary reversal (*ulati*): “Having reversed (*ulata*) (the mind) I arrived at the Home of homes” (GGS 352). For this to happen, Guru Arjan notes a more specific and social step:

Turn away (*ulatii*), O my mind, turn away.

Turn away from the sinner.

O false is the love of the false one; break, O my mind, break, break company with the sinner.

(GGS 535)

But how to clean the tar-stained heart/mind (*man*) inherited from many lives living as a sinner as well as living with sinners? First one must recognize as Guru Amar Das notes, “When the mind is filthy, everything is filthy; by washing the body, the mind is not cleaned,” and that change comes by reversal unto death of the ego-mind, not via religious techniques and rituals:

Even if one learns the Yogic postures of the Siddhas, and holds his sexual energy back,
still, the filth of the mind is not removed, nor the filth of egotism goes.
This mind is not controlled by any other discipline, except the Sanctuary of the True Guru.
(GGS 558)

Guru Nanak summarizes the process of becoming dead to karmically binding actions and alive to liberating ones:

When I turned away, and became dead-while-yet-alive, I was awakened.
Reciting the Word my mind is connected to Hari (God)
I have gathered in the sublime taste and cast out the poison.
Abiding in His Love, the fear of death has run away.
My taste for pleasure, conflict and egotism has ended.
My consciousness is attuned to Hari by the Order of the Infinite . . .
Uniting with *Hukam*, I’ve entered the home of my inner self . . .
Nanak is absorbed in effortless becoming (*sahaj*) through the Guru’s Teachings.
(GGS 221)

The fact that ego-death is beyond the ego’s will to command, just as one cannot think oneself beyond thinking, so it is the case that a subject cannot delink itself from subject-object duality. *Ulat* refers therefore to an *affective* (not merely cognitive) event or happening beyond one’s rational control.

Guru Nanak sings, “Desire (*trishanaa*) is exhausted only when the mind is imbued with the Name,” then “the Messenger of Death does not even approach the servant of Hari” (GGS 1091). Just as duality is a killer, so is the Word the killer of duality: granting freedom from habituated compulsions and returning to perceiving the world as Word:

In the love of duality, they murder their own souls.
Crying out, “Mine, mine!”, they are ruined.
They do not remember their souls; they are asleep in superstition.
He alone dies a real death, who dies in the Word.
(GGS 362)

That is to say, “Whoever dies through the Word, is known to be truly dead [to the world],” and “without the Word, everyone is dead” (GGS 1418). As Guru Nanak sings, “I have no anxiety about dying and no hope for living” (GGS 20), leading to “no desire for paradise (*suraga*) and fear of hell (*naraka*)” (GGS 1370). “The Word is the killer of *maaiiaa* which the Gurmukh attains” (GGS 853). Killing death one uncovers immortality: “One who dies through the Word kills death (*sabadi marai taa maari maru*)” and “through the fear (of God) fear itself flees (*bhai bhaagiiai*)” (GGS 1010). This is not a matter of creating immortality but returning to it as our primordial home. Guru Nanak sings, “One who is killed through the Word (*sabadi mue*) kills the mind with the mind” (*manu mana te maariaa*) (GGS 796). This killing death and being killed by the Word is not gradual: “he dies in

an instant when he realizes the Word. His consciousness becomes permanently stable as his mind accepts this death,” and this is what it means “to recognize the Name” (GGS 932).

Conclusion

As noted by Taussig, secular modernity has marginalized the spirits of the dead to the extent that death itself is largely neglected in the West. Yet both he and the Sikh Gurus know, “the worldly person is not rid of his fear of death” (GGS 1030). Thus, despite the “disenchantment of the world,” something beyond religion moves to fill that vacuum. “Poetry is what after the death of God is the privileged form of mimetic language that can invoke the spirits of the dead as the ground for communion with things as people” (2001: 316). Here, Taussig comes very close to naming poetry the secular form of revelation because it is only poetic language that engages the abject: “it is only with abjection, when boundaries between self and other become blurred and fearsomely up for grabs, does language soar [poetically] because abjection is the preeminent state of living-death where subject and object stage their epistemic panic” (2001: 315). The epistemic panic is real for it discloses the fictional projections of the ego-mind onto the world of forms. The GGS views self-loss (*aap-gavaai*) and ego-death (*aap-mare*) as transformative and positive, necessary to evolve, whereas Western subjectivity views it only through horror and abjection (given the death of god is the rise of egoic man).

Taussig’s reflections are important not only because he discusses poetic consciousness and merger via abjection but because he also ties the two together such that the latter gives birth to the former within the context of negotiating the dead. This tripartite structure (poetry –abjection/merger – death) acts as a helpful bridge in comprehending the GGS’s difference in its reflections on death and dying. Guru Nanak succinctly expressed that the shift in awareness (from *manmukh* to *gurmukh*) exceeds the worldly or secular mindset. Therefore, contra Taussig, the GGS resists viewing death/merger as abjection and offers a positive reading that culminates in the Gurmukh’s “fourth stage” of evolution and whose “fourth state” awareness yields poetic revelations.

This latter saintly state radicalizes the earlier discussed temporal structure of death that creates the distinction between things as being animate or inanimate. I have argued elsewhere (2012: 1–4) that the myopia shown by most Western secular thinkers arises in the unconscious adoption of a vertical frame of dualistic transcendence inherited from Abrahamic traditions – which negatively reads the body as bestial and so something to overcome. Contrary to that frame is the GGS’s nondual horizontal immanence – as “the creator is in the creation and the creation is in the creator” (GGS 1350; 250). This allows for a different reading to arise, one that negates the ascetic (religious or secular) necessity to overcome the body and instead replaces it with the necessity to overcome the (egoic) mind. In the GGS’s immanent and horizontal frame therefore, the non-egoic, unselfconscious mind does not necessarily imply “returning” to “animal” unconsciousness. Rather, in the GGS it implies a reversal (*ulat*) to the immortal awareness in all beings – that primordial non-egoic silent absorption into the beginning of things (*sun-n-samaadh*) noted previously. The key difference in the GGS is the shift towards a non-egoic, non-dualistic mind: “The distracted mind has been absorbed into the Essenceless Void; duality and dualistic thinking have run away” (GGS 333). Western humanism is predicated on overcoming the animal body, whereas the GGS’s saintliness is centered on overcoming the human mind.

Taussig inadvertently also reveals the limit of secular thinking: merger can only be pathological, for those who have not undergone normal socialization or those who struggle with severe depression. Taussig cites Sylvia Plath’s poetic lines: “Dying/is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well” (2001: 311). However, Plath committed suicide (stemming from the rage against her

father) and her poem itself “Lady Lazarus” reflects upon how she wants to commit suicide nine times like a cat. But self-loss may instigate a wholly different merger and give rise to a wholly different poetic consciousness and speech. If we were to read the lines of the first verse not through the lens of abjection (as Taussig does) but the GGS’s rhetoric of killing the self (humbling the ego) and reforming the mind, then “Dying is [indeed] an art, like everything else” as we saw, for Kabir and the Gurus, that yields great bliss and self-knowledge, not self-destructive anguish.

The GGS proposes a way here that Taussig and others, limited by the thinking secular self, overlook. It is not only with abjection that the boundaries of self and other merge. It is also through mystical love (*bhagati*) and serving the other through devotion (*sevaa*) that it may arise. The Sikh Gurus’ poetic speech beyond the ego is known as a speechless-speech (*akath-kathaa*), that is, the nonexclusive revelation that forms the GGS. This is what true death via ego-death yields: the experiential ability to enter a spontaneous, effortless, creative, fearless speechless-speech – that is crucially beyond the thinking egoic-self (GGS 1092): “(When) the (egoic) mind merges back into the (non-egoic) Mind, (then) one speaks the Unspeakable” (GGS 1031), which is beyond the ability of the worldly person (GGS 1233) as it is the province only of the saintly (GGS 69).

The goal of being dead (to the world) by being alive (to the Word) combines the ascetic (*sannyas*) with the householder (*grihast*), forging an aporetic third Way (*maarga*) beyond other-worldly “dying” [e.g., Jain fast to death (*sallekhanaa*)] and this-worldly “living.” Sikhs are not only critical of renouncers (*jogis*) but also indulgers (*bhogis*). The Sikh treatment of death and dying in the physical form is thus framed by the teachings of death and dying of the ego-mind through the Word (*jivat-marai*) as a middle way. This death-while-living is understood as natural (*sahaj*) and the only way to be a true (*saciaaraa*) being who gains the non-egoic revelatory form of speaking the unspeakable (*akath-kathaa*), which cannot be imitated and forms the ground for true ethical behavior (GGS 610; 806). The GGS’s understanding of revelation is not merely to hear or recite the Word but to gain the ability to speak and sing it. Yet the acquiring of this revelatory voice is predicated on the ego-mind dying to the Word resonating in the fabric of all things.

GGS References

The following references come from the standard 1430-page text of the GGS.

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Further Readings

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19

ECOTHEOLOGY

Susan E. Prill

Introduction

Sikhism is increasingly grappling with ways of responding to the global environmental crisis. This process has accelerated noticeably since the founding of the organization EcoSikh in 2009, but precedents can be found in organizations like Pingalwara, which was created in the mid-twentieth century. Environmental activism in Punjab and globally may be given an explicitly Sikh emphasis through three main arguments: (1) that the Sikh ideals of *sarbat dā bhalā* (the well-being of all) and especially *sevā* (service) should include social and environmental advocacy; (2) that passages in the *gurbāṇī*, particularly the second shalok of *Japjī* (GGS: 8), suggest that environmental sensitivity is an integral part of the Sikh faith; (3) that Guru Har Rai expressed a desire to attend to nature and Sikhs who choose to do so are thus honoring his teachings. Sikh environmentalism has received minimal scholarly attention to date, but it promises to be an important development for Sikhs both in India and worldwide. As this trend gains momentum, the ecological aspects of Sikh scripture and history will almost certainly be used as resources both for the Sikh community and as a basis for conversation with non-Sikh environmental groups. As a lived tradition, Sikhism is thus in the early stages of what may prove to be an extended dialogue with ecological rhetoric.

Ecology and Religions

Most of the major world religions are now moving to address the crisis of climate change and encourage environmental sensitivity through novel interpretations of texts and the creation of new environmental organizations. Bauman, Bohannon, and O'Brien have proposed a threefold schema for understanding the ways in which religions may approach these issues:

If religious people seek to do something about this problem [of environmental degradation], are they best served by *recovering* wisdom in the traditions [religious people] have inherited, by *reforming* those traditions in light of the new situation, or by *replacing* traditional religion in favor of something new and more suited to the current crisis?

(Bauman et al. 2011: 59)

Recovery in the Sikh milieu is seen in an increased emphasis on selected verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and *reformation* has focused on a broadening of the concept of *sevā*. *Replacement* is perhaps less likely to arise than it would in a North American Christian setting, because of the way in which Sikh religious identity is closely tied with other cultural markers such as diet and marriage practices. This leads even Sikhs who are not particularly religiously observant to continue to self-identify as Sikh.

Punjabi Environmental Issues

Because the largest concentration of Sikhs is in Indian Punjab, most Sikh environmental activity has centered on the challenges facing that region. Most prominent of these are unsustainable farming and water use practices, in great part resulting from the Green Revolution of the mid-twentieth century, which encouraged heavy use of irrigation and fertilizers. Punjab also faces many problems that are common in rapidly developing areas and in the developed world, such as the growth of motor vehicle usage and conspicuous consumption among the rising middle class.

Punjab is sometimes called the “breadbasket of India” and is farmed very intensively. Punjab produces approximately 19% of the wheat grown in India (Ministry of Agriculture 2012), most of it from high-yielding varieties introduced during the Green Revolution. Although these high-yielding crops allowed India to become self-sufficient in the 1970s, the crops grown require intensive irrigation and the use of synthetic fertilizers. Urea use has grown because of government subsidies, causing the soil to become depleted (Anand 2010). The degradation of the soil resulting from these practices has led to some instability in crop yields. The economy of Punjab is dependent on agriculture, and so the environmental problem has clear social and economic repercussions.

As farming expanded during the Green Revolution, trees were cut to plant more crops. Approximately 4% of Punjab is now forested, in stark contrast to 28% of neighboring Himachal Pradesh, which is mountainous and therefore not farmed very intensively (Ministry of Environment and Forest 2019). While it would not be realistic to expect Punjab to become very heavily forested, environmental organizations hope to increase both the number and the diversity of trees planted in Punjab, with an emphasis on reintroducing native species.

Punjab faces significant problems with air pollution from diesel engines in trucks, tractors, and combine harvesters, as well as from the agricultural practice of burning field stubble at the end of the season. In 2019, more than 40,000 deaths in Punjab were linked to air pollution (Jassowal 2021). Many Punjabi rivers and other water sources are also heavily polluted from agricultural runoff and other sources.

Reformation: *Sevā*, *Langar*, and *Prasād*

In the process of putting ecological awareness into action, prominent Sikhs and Sikh-led organizations have engaged in recovery and reformation of well-established traditions. The Sikh concept of *sevā* has been particularly important in this regard. *Sevā*, or *karsevā*, is both a practical way to keep Sikh institutions running and a vision for work-as-worship. In its usual usage, though, *sevā* refers to work done for the benefit of others as an act of selfless volunteerism or charity. In an ecological sense, *sevā* often means reforming Sikh institutions with environmental concerns in mind but can also encompass a broader concern for planetary well-being.

The large number of Sikh environmental activities accomplished by purely or mostly voluntary labor is indicative of the importance of the practice of *sevā*. High-profile projects such as the cleanup of the Kali Bein and the planting of trees at Khadur Sahib, both discussed in the next section, are

often completed through *sevē*. Through *sevē*, Sikhs can avoid governmental red tape and undertake ambitious projects in a relatively efficient manner. *Sevē* is the driving force behind much Sikh environmental activity and serves as an underpinning for numerous charitable organizations.

There have also been efforts to limit the environmental impact of the Sikh community kitchen or *langar* and distribution of blessed food, *prasād*. The widespread distribution of tree saplings by environmental organizations often makes use of the term *prasād* and the idea of free distribution of something that is considered blessed by Waheguru. These examples resemble United Sikhs' extension of the concept of *langar* into a food pantry that serves the larger community in Orange County, California (United Sikhs n.d.). Reformation of preexisting Sikh concepts to fit the modern context is thus a central practice among Sikh activists.

Since 2013, EcoAmritsar, an initiative of EcoSikh, has been arranging green *nagar kīrtans*. A *nagar kīrtan* is a procession around a town (*nagar*) with Sikhs following the *Guru Granth Sahib* and singing hymns (*kīrtan*). Green *nagar kīrtans* use the framework of the *nagar kīrtan* and combine it with cleaning up litter. Many participants carry placards with slogans urging environmental responsibility (EcoAmritsar 2013).

EcoSikh provides guidelines for green *nagar kīrtans*, including recommendations to use and collect biodegradable plates made from leaves and serve organic food for *langar* (EcoSikh n.d.a). The organization specifically mentions the religious justification for this, saying, "The reason for our concern for the environment is our Sikh spirit of *Sarbat da bhalaa* (EcoSikh n.d.a)." *This phrase, which literally means the well-being of all, is drawn from the Ardās, the Sikh petitionary prayer, and lies in the background of much Sikh thinking around political and social activism.*

Sarbat dā Bhalā

In an ecological sense, *sarbat dā bhalā* may be expanded beyond humankind to include planetary well-being. In a blog post on February 10, 2008, Umendra Dutt of the natural farming organization Khedi Virasat Mission mentioned "Guru Nanak's [sic] precept of *Sarbat dā Bhalā*," before describing its farming method as "Nanak Khedi," or farming in the style of Nanak. *Sarbat dā bhalā* is often invoked in the context of social and economic justice issues, which are intertwined with environmental concerns in numerous ways. Although the phrase "*Sarbat dā bhalā*" is not used in the Sikh Faith Statement on the environment developed in 2003 by the Akal Takht in cooperation with the World Bank and Alliance for Religion and Conservation, the overall emphasis on social justice issues and equality found in that statement appears informed by the concept (Palmer 2003: 131–142).

Key Sikh Environmental Organizations

There are several high-profile Sikh organizations that work on environmental issues. In some cases, environmental work is the primary focus of the group. In others, it is linked to a broader humanitarian mission. Additionally, some groups may be Sikh-led but actively seek ties with other religious communities. Discussed later are some of the most prominent groups, selected for their frequent use of Sikh religious language in discussing environmental issues.

The most established environmental organization in Punjab is Pingalwara, based in Amritsar. Building on initiatives from the 1930s, and formally founded by Bhagat Puran Singh in 1957, Pingalwara focuses on caring for the destitute and has several branches throughout the Punjab. Although Pingalwara is primarily known for its work with the poor and with individuals with physical and mental disabilities, Bhagat Puran Singh also had a strong environmental agenda. He wrote and distributed pamphlets advocating tree planting and voicing concern for soil degradation and

erosion. Pingalwara itself has become something of a model for sustainable living. It currently hosts a sustainable (“zero budget”) farm, a sewage treatment plant, and a biogas plant. The organization also claims to have planted 900,000 trees in India (Pingalwara 2013), a number presumably referencing the Naulakha Bagh (Garden of 900,000 Plants) of Guru Har Rai, discussed later.

The Pingalwara Farm, in Dhirekot, practices what the organization calls “Natural Farming,” credited to Subhash Palekar of Maharashtra (Bhagat Puran Singh Natural Farming and Research Centre). The farm produces all of its fertilizer and fungicide from mixtures of cow dung and urine and plants grown on the property. The link between sustainable farming practice and Bhagat Puran Singh, widely revered for his *sevā*, gives religious significance to the work, and the farm has several quotations from the *Guru Granth Sahib* posted.

In Punjab today, one of the highest profile Sikhs working on environmental issues from a religious perspective is Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal of the Nirmala sect. Seechewal is best known for his work in cleaning up the Kali Bein, a tributary of the Sutlej River. Guru Nanak is believed by Sikhs to have disappeared while bathing in the Kali Bein. His disappearance is understood as a transformative experience, as he is said to have ascended to the Divine Court. Upon reappearing, Guru Nanak began spreading his religious insights. Thus, in some sense, the Kali Bein is the site of the foundation of the Sikh tradition. The river was, like many rivers in Punjab, polluted with agricultural run-off, untreated sewage, and an overgrowth of water hyacinth that clogged the waterway. There had been ongoing governmental attempts to clean the river, but Seechewal’s high-profile cleanup in 2000 brought the river to the attention of a larger percentage of the populace. This effort began with Seechewal dramatically entering the river and manually removing the water hyacinth and has continued through largely manual labor. Working on the riverbank by hand is understood as *sevā* and gives a religious flavor to the hard work of cleaning up the river, although heavy machinery was also used. The project received significant funding from Sikhs abroad (Singh S. 2007) and appears to be generally regarded as successful. Seechewal has also sponsored the construction of bathing *ghats* along the riverside, which serve to emphasize the improved cleanliness of the Kali Bein. Seechewal has since expanded his river project to raise awareness about the Buddha Nullah, a highly polluted stream that flows into the Sutlej River after it passes through the city of Ludhiana.

Baba Sewa Singh, who directs the Nishan-e-Sikhi Charitable Trust at Khadur Sahib, near Goin-dwal, has overseen the planting and distribution of hundreds of thousands of trees. The roads approaching Khadur Sahib are lined with a number of species of trees, mostly native, and there are also gardens planted with a wider variety of trees. Trees are planted with care and protected with metal frames. In some years, tree seedlings have been distributed as *prasād*, and Khadur Sahib has persuaded farmers in the area to plant orchards rather than less sustainable crops (Nishan-e-Sikhi 2010). The tree planting initiative has been expanded to Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh as well as to several parts of Punjab (Nishan-e-Sikhi 2010).

EcoSikh is the most prominent Sikh organization working on environmental issues globally. It was founded in 2009 in partnership with the Sikh Council on Religion and Education (SCORE) in response to an initiative of the United Nations Development Program and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (EcoSikh n.d.c). Although much of its work is in the Punjab, EcoSikh has an explicitly global emphasis and has done an impressive amount of work in building a worldwide network of environment-focused Sikh activities and gurdwaras. Projects include an attempt to “green” gurdwaras, especially through reducing the usage of disposable plates during langar, and working towards the greening of the areas surrounding the Harmandir in Amritsar (Singh, R. P. 2012). The organization is best known for Sikh Environment Day (Sikh Vatavaran Divas), celebrated on March 14, the anniversary of Guru Har Rai’s ascension to the Guruship.

This holiday, inaugurated in 2011, has grown rapidly in popularity both in India and in the diaspora. Gurdwaras ranging in size from the important Takht in Nanded to small local gurdwaras in Pittsburgh and Singapore have participated. The leaders of the Five Takhts recently formally endorsed Sikh Environment Day (EcoSikh 2013c). The most popular activity appears to be tree planting, which was recently prescribed for this day by the Jathedar of Takht Hazur Sahib (Singh J. K. 2013). Other activities listed on the EcoSikh website include general cleanup, the installation of solar panels, and seminars, with more than 1,500 activities in 2013 (Singh, R. 2013). EcoSikh's mission thus takes in both small-scale changes to individual behavior and large-scale changes to the environments around Sikh pilgrimage sites.

Recovery: Scriptural Sources and the Life of Guru Har Rai Ji

Sikhs engaged in recovery of existing environmental traditions have largely concentrated on two sources: scriptural selections from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the life of the seventh Guru, Har Rai, who is revered for his sensitivity to the natural world. While it is not always fully understood because of linguistic changes since its compilation, the *Guru Granth Sahib* serves as an anchor, and its words are familiar to most Sikhs. Efforts at recovering inherent scriptural wisdom to construct an ecotheology for Sikhism have often taken the form of the liberal quotation of specific lines from the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The life stories of the Gurus are regarded by most Sikhs as illustrations of Sikhi as lived to its fullest and thus serve as a parallel, explanatory body of religious knowledge, illustrating the teachings of the Gurus in an approachable manner. These stories are most often conveyed orally. It is also very common to see images of the Gurus enacting key events from their lives. In this way, hagiographical events are thus communicated to the entire Sikh community, including those Sikhs who struggle with the language of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Recovery in this instance has taken the form of increased emphasis on certain events. By bringing Guru Har Rai to the forefront, rather than one of the more well-known Gurus, environmentally minded Sikhs are thus shifting the focus within the tradition.

Support for Environmentalism in *Gurbāṇī*

Much as the Abrahamic monotheisms are increasingly reinterpreting the concept of dominion over the Earth from their creation story, Sikhs seeking to give environmental activism a religious flavor have found encouragement in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Through study of the sacred text, Sikhs may come to understand their tradition as oriented towards both social justice and environmentalism.

The philosophy scholar S. Lourdunathan refers to Sikhism as an Ecosophical tradition. By this he means a tradition that “attempt[s] to go beyond anthropocentrism towards holistic consciousness of the universe” (Lourdunathan 2012: 167). Lourdunathan cites several examples of this, largely having to do with the Sikh understanding of creation as both real and ongoing. This is in contrast with the radical nondualism of Shankara, which states that the visible world is inherently illusory. Other Sikh beliefs that Lourdunathan considers ecosophical include the condemnation of *haumai* (egocentrism) and the concept of the Earth as Dharamsal (in this case, a place for practicing dharma) (Lourdunathan 2012: 169).

In looking at the teachings of the Gurus as a whole, it seems that Lourdunathan overstates the degree to which Sikh scripture is anti-monistic. Guru Nanak famously referred to the world as a “palace of smoke” (GGS: 138) and made countless references to the idea of *māyā* (Illusion). While the Gurus did not teach a radical nondualism, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that some

aspects of Sikh thought constitute a qualified nondualism (in which Creator and Creation are part of the same whole) (GGS: 125) or panentheism (in which the Creator pervades the natural world) (GGS: 24), while many others are monotheistic, including passages in Japji Sahib, where God is described as the King of Kings (GGS: 6). These different interpretations lend themselves to varying understandings of the relationship between the natural world and divinity.

In some cases, these understandings of the nature of the Divine overlap. In one composition, Guru Nanak describes the Divine as pervading water and dry land, two couplets before he asserts that earth and sky are temporary, while God is permanent (GGS: 64). Creation is thus penetrated by the essence of divinity, but the Creator remains stable, while creation fluctuates. The elements thus contain the Divine, just as individuals contain an inner Guru whom they may embrace or reject. There are no physical limits possible for the one who is timeless, fearless, and self-existent, as described in the opening passage of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

It is in this context that Guru Nanak describes the Earth as a mother. This passage is by far the most frequently cited verse in an environmental context and comes from Guru Nanak's *shalok* (verse) at the end of Japji Sahib. In Punjabi, the verse begins "*pavanu gurū pāṇī pitā*," and it is often quoted in transliterated Punjabi even in documents that are otherwise in English. This verse bears quoting in context:

Air is our Guru, water our father,
and the great earth our mother.
Day and night are the female and male nurses
in whose laps the whole universe plays.
Good and bad deeds are all disclosed
in the presence of Righteousness.
Our actions take us near or far.
Those who remember the Name earn true success.
Nanak says their faces shine,
and they take many with them to liberation.

(Singh N.-G. K. 1995: 67)

The imagery of the first line is of the elements as supporting or guiding humankind. This is generally interpreted by environmentally minded Sikhs as obligating the listener to respect and care for the natural world. The imagery of nature as parent, nurse, and Guru suggests a sense of interconnectedness and even intimacy with the natural world, as seen in Deep Ecology or the Gaia hypothesis. Therefore, if one is acting in an environmentally insensitive manner, one is violating a relationship that is both sacred and tender.

This verse is also useful for Sikh environmentalists who wish to tie Sikh theology with the idea of Mother Earth, an idea with cross-cultural appeal. The verse is quoted in the vast majority of Sikh writings on the environment, and when only one quotation from the *gurbāṇī* is selected in this context, it is almost always this one.

In the environmental context, the second half of the first couplet, referring to day and night, is only rarely quoted. Humans have no control over the cycle of day and night, and so this imagery implies no ethical obligations. In the broader context of Guru Nanak's teachings, it appears to suggest the all-pervasiveness of the divine. If the earth, water, and wind each contain guidance and the day and night provide nurture, then one need not go on formal pilgrimage or visit temples. The divine is both proximate and easily accessible to one who pays close attention.

The overarching message of the shalok, though, is of ethical behavior and meditation on the Name, neither of which is linked directly in the verse with caring for the environment as an external entity. Thus, a verse that begins with a metaphorical depiction of nature as caring for humanity concludes with an exhortation to ethical behavior, with a promise that such action will bring rewards in the divine court.

The second most commonly cited passage from the *Guru Granth Sahib* comes from the refrain of another shalok by Guru Nanak and is transliterated as “*baliharī kudratī vasiā*.” The key section is in italics:

Suffering is the medicine, and pleasure the disease, because where there is pleasure, there is no desire for God.

You are the Creator Lord; I can do nothing. Even if I try, nothing happens. || 1 ||

I am a sacrifice to Your almighty creative power which is pervading everywhere.

Your limits cannot be known. || 1 || Pause ||

Your Light is in Your creatures, and Your creatures are in Your Light; Your almighty power is pervading everywhere.

You are the True Lord and Master; Your Praise is so beautiful. One who sings it, is carried across.

Nanak speaks the stories of the Creator Lord; whatever He is to do, He does. || 2 ||

(GGS: 469, translation by Sant Singh Khalsa, srigranth.org. Italics mine.)

Most commonly, it is the first line of the refrain that is quoted, much as in the case of Pavan Guru Pani Pita. “Balihari Kudrati Vassia” is emblazoned on the materials distributed by Nishan-e-Sikhi Charitable Trust at Khadur Sahib, which is heavily involved in environmental work, and both lines of the refrain are painted on an exterior wall of the farm operated by Pingalwara. This refrain, combined with the following line about light (*joti*) as present in creatures (*jāti*), clearly indicates a vision of the Divine as present in all of Creation. The word *kudratī* can mean “nature,” so this verse may be read as an explicit endorsement of the idea that God is found in/through the natural world.

EcoSikh has compiled a short online anthology of *Gurbāṇī* concerned with the environment, titled *Ek Bageecha* (“One Garden”). The title is a reference to a composition by Guru Arjan in which the Divine Guru is described as the Gardener of mythical plants that hold the sacred Name. The true devotee is one who receives this fruit, crossing over the ocean of illusion and avoiding the pools of poison that surround the garden (GGS: 385). From the perspective of environmentalism, the divine Gardener can be seen both as a role model for humans, who must also care for Creation, and as a reminder of the divinity held within Creation itself. The anthology contains several hymns extoling the beauty of the natural world, as well as a large number in which the Divine is understood as encompassing all of the elements and ecosystems such as deserts and oceans (EcoSikh 2013a).

Also along these lines is Guru Nanak’s well-known *Ārati* (GGS: 13), which speaks of the entire universe participating in worship. The imagery used is a reference to a form of Hindu worship in which a flame on a tray is waved before an image. Nanak speaks of celestial objects as lamps and of the world’s plants as altar flowers. The subtext of the hymn is a contrast between the relatively small scale of Hindu worship in comparison with the grandeur of Creation, but it can easily be read as a declaration of the sacred nature of plants, the wind, the moon, etc. Guru Arjan also evokes this theme in a different composition in which he states, “In the mountains, trees, deserts and waters, in all the Worlds, in each and every heart, is the Good Abode of my Beloved” (GGS: 1272).

Although the Gurus clearly disapproved of Hindu pilgrimages to sacred rivers, the sense that Nature is an expression of the majesty of the Divine is found in numerous passages in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, especially in the compositions of Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan. In some ways, the criticism of pilgrimage to sites such as Varanasi may be rooted in an idea that the entire world is sacred and therefore that selecting one particular place for worship implies an ignorance of the other glories of Creation. There are also Hindu texts that assert the divinity of all Creation (Dwivedi 2003), but in the time of the Gurus, it was more common for Hindus to revere some specific locations more than others.

Environmental thinking in Sikhism tends to emphasize those verses that have a panentheistic or qualified nondualistic character over those in which the Divine is understood as an overseer of the Universe. If the Creator is a part of Creation, then it becomes important for Sikhs to care for Creation, and such care can be construed as worship. To ignore either Creator or Creation is to fall victim to *haumai*. In some sense, the shortsightedness inherent in *haumai* can be understood as the root of most environmental problems. While the Gurus teach that *haumai* distracts one from spiritual pursuits, the current state of the environment indicates that there are earthly problems with self-centeredness as well.

One manifestation of *haumai* may be an emphasis on sensual pleasures. There are numerous passages in the *gurbāṇī* that remark upon the futility of worldly wealth, often contrasting such wealth with the poverty of spirit that may accompany it. This aspect of the teachings of the Gurus has not yet been a major part of the Sikh rhetoric on environmental issues, but it may become more important as the discussion moves forward.

The paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould once observed that “we will not fight to save what we do not love” (Gould 1993: 40). In this regard, there are copious sources in the *Guru Granth Sahib* in which the natural surroundings are portrayed with vivid imagery and a deep sense of appreciation. Most notable amongst these sources are the *Bārah Māhā* (Twelve Months) compositions of Guru Nanak (in Rāg Tukhāri) and Guru Arjan (in Rāg Mājh). Guru Nanak’s *Bārah Māhā* is particularly notable for its detailed descriptions of the glories of nature, which are contrasted with the suffering of the bride/soul in separation from her beloved/God. Each month is described in loving detail, with special attention paid to the flora and fauna. Thus, we hear of the blossoms and bumblebees of springtime and the greenery, snakes, and mosquitoes of the monsoon season. In the summer, the blazing sun scorches the earth, and in the winter, the snow comes (GGS: 1107–1110). The state of the soul in its separation from God is the main theological message, but Nanak’s *Bārah Māhā* also provides a clear and appealing portrait of the climate and ecosystem of pre-modern Punjab. From an ecological perspective, one could easily compare the climate described in the *Bārah Māhā* with that of the current era: does the monsoon still reliably bring rain? Does winter generally mean snow? Do the species mentioned still thrive? Texts such as this call for Sikhs to pay attention to the natural cycles around them and thus enhance environmental awareness.

Guru Har Rai

The seventh Sikh Guru, Har Rai (1630–1661), is frequently cited as a role model for environmentally minded Sikhs, and the date of his ascension to the Guruship (celebrated on March 14) is observed as Sikh Environment Day. In a press release, the president of EcoSikh referred to Guru Har Rai as the “Green Guru” and emphasized the Guru’s connection with nature (EcoSikh 2013a).

Guru Har Rai became Guru at the age of 14 after the somewhat turbulent Guruship of his grandfather, Guru Hargobind. Hargobind is chiefly remembered for his martial and kingly pursuits and as a hunter, and while Har Rai’s Guruship retained many of these martial elements, he is

generally thought of as gentler and more mild-mannered than his grandfather. His life is very poorly documented, but a few key points are often emphasized and have become part of the popular understanding of his character.

One popular story recounts the development of environmental sensitivity in the young Har Rai. According to tradition, Har Rai was walking in a garden, and his cloak brushed against a flower, breaking it from its stem. The young Har Rai is said to have expressed remorse for the harm that he had inadvertently done to the plant and to have carefully gathered his clothing around him while walking for the rest of his life (Singh H. 1994: 52). The details of this event vary according to telling, but the overarching message seems to be that the future Guru expressed compassion and regret at the needless harm to the beautiful plant. While the Guru enjoyed hunting like his grandfather, he is said to have never killed an animal but instead kept them in a zoo at Kiratpur. This episode thus serves to tie the Guru to a feeling of sensitivity to the natural world, which has clearly contributed to him being evoked as the “Green Guru.”

A second episode from the life of Guru Har Rai states that he had a large garden of medicinal plants in Kiratpur, known as the Naulakha Bagh. Legend states that the Mughal emperor's son, Dara Shikoh, had been poisoned (tradition indicates that the substance used was tiger whiskers) and was on the verge of death. After exhausting other options, the emperor sought help from Guru Har Rai, who sent plants that cured his illness. The Guru acted out of kindheartedness despite the clear enmity between the emperor and the Sikh community, and this broad sense of compassion appears to be a significant aspect of Guru Har Rai's character in Sikh thinking (Singh K. 1963: 68 n. 15).

The garden of Guru Har Rai is often referred to by Sikhs engaging in reforestation, and the garden in Kiratpur has recently been the focus of a sustained restoration project by EcoSikh together with the Shree Ganga Nursery and the Shree Ganga Nursery Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which supervises historic gurdwaras (EcoSikh, *Sikhs Reviving Historical Naulakha Bagh of Guru Har Rai on His 383rd Birth Anniversary*, 2013b). Baba Sewa Singh of Khadur Sahib was involved in the preparatory work for this initiative, including researching which plants were in use historically (Nishan-e-Sikhi 2010), and thus the revival of Naulakha Bagh represents the cooperation of several different agencies. Key to this project is an emphasis on plants traditionally used for medical purposes, and so its recreation may also be useful for sustaining and reviving indigenous medical knowledge.

Sacred Trees

A third example of recovery lies in the Sikh traditions around sacred trees. Many historic gurdwaras are centered on or named after trees. The most famous of these include Dukh Bhanjani Ber (“The Tree which Removes Sorrows”) and Ber Baba Budha Sahib, both jujube trees in the precincts of Harmandir Sahib. According to tradition, the former tree marks the site where a leper was cured by taking a dip in the pond that was ultimately expanded to be the Sarovar of Harmandir Sahib. It is now a popular site for petitionary prayer, particularly for cures for intractable diseases and infertility. Numerous other examples exist, with at least 58 Sikh shrines being named after 19 species of trees (Jaspal 2010). Many of these trees, like Dukh Bhanjani Ber, are understood to have been the site of miraculous or historical events.

D.S. Jaspal, who worked to document these trees, has started a Museum of Trees on his personal property in Chandigarh for the purposes of preserving these species. He has a background in forestry and as a high-ranking civil servant with a marketing background, and the museum draws on both scientific and marketing-based approaches to conservation. It includes clones of particularly significant trees, including Dukh Bhanjani Ber, as well as a tree from Sri Lanka believed to be

descended from the tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment. Part of the project includes environmental education, with an explicit emphasis on conservation of endangered species of trees (Chandigarh Nature and Health Society n.d.). As with Naulakha Bagh, the Museum of Trees contains a section dedicated to medicinal plants. As of my visit in February 2014, the museum was still being developed, but the ultimate intention is to reach out to schoolchildren and community members through scheduled programs and tours.

There have been numerous efforts to encourage tree planting as a religiously informed practice. These include activities associated with Sikh Environment Day and the planting of tree seedlings as *prasād* at Gurdwara Khadur Sahib, including native species such as neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) trees (news.oneindia.in 2010). A recent painting by Rahi Mohinder Singh given to EcoSikh shows Guru Har Rai giving a tree to a petitioner to plant (EcoSikh 2013a), although the species portrayed appears to be eucalyptus, a non-native species that would not have been in use during the Guru's lifetime (Gurinder Singh Mann, personal communication, May 12, 2013). Regardless of the species used, tree planting has resonance for Sikhs because of the presence of so many trees in gurdwaras, but probably also because of its symbolic simplicity.

In commemoration of the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 2019, EcoSikh launched an initiative to plant many "Guru Nanak Sacred Forests," with a goal of one million trees planted. This initiative was a collaboration with the NGO Afforestt, which uses a method developed by Akira Miyawaki, a Japanese botanist, to plant trees more closely together than in conventional planting and is supposed to shorten the time to a mature forest. Two years later, they have planted more than 300 mini-forests, mostly in Punjab, comprising more than 150,000 native plants. Images on the EcoSikh website and Facebook page indicate that these small forests are growing very rapidly and are already providing habitat for numerous insects and birds. These mini-forests, many of which are in urban areas, are explicitly aimed at cleaning the air and reestablishing biodiversity (EcoSikh n.d.b).

Another initiative launched recently is the Guru Granth Sahib Bagh, on the grounds of a historic gurdwara, Gurur Sar Sahib, in Moga district. This forest, a cooperative project of EcoSikh and PETALS, contains all 58 species of plants mentioned in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. It was inaugurated in September 2021 (Singh G. 2021). Each plant is accompanied by a stone that has been engraved with the relevant excerpt from the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Tree planting is also a common devotional act in the Sikh diaspora. The Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society, a gurdwara near Pittsburgh, recently inaugurated the Guru Har Rai Arboretum, featuring trees and shrubs native to Pennsylvania (communication with Manmohan Singh Luthra, March 16, 2013). Thus, even in areas where species such as neem and pipal are unlikely to grow successfully, there is still a sense that tree planting is in alignment with the tradition of Guru Har Rai and with the Sikh emphasis on service.

Conclusion

Although there is a long tradition of environmental activism dating back to Bhagat Puran Singh, Sikh work on environmental issues has become more visible and more concerted since the founding of EcoSikh in 2009 and the inaugural Sikh Environment Day in 2011. Numerous high-ranking religious officials, including the Jathedars of the Five Takhts, have endorsed environmentalism. It remains to be seen how successful these efforts will be, but now there appears to be some momentum behind the idea of understanding Sikhism as a "green" religion. There is now a collection of relevant *gurbānī*, and seminars are being organized for the explicit purpose of thinking of Sikhism's environment. It seems likely that the environmental content of Sikh scripture and tradition will continue to play a more prominent role in the process of "greening" Sikhism. Individual initiatives

such as those at Khadur Sahib and the Kali Bein may well form the basis of an expanding Sikh environmental movement.

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PART IV

Activism



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ANTICOLONIAL RESISTANCE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Babbar Akalis and Kirti-Kisan Party

Amrit Deol

Historical Retrospect

The activism and anticolonial practices of Sikh peoples at the turn of the twentieth century was informed by their lived experiences as colonial subjects in British India and abroad. Critical events in Punjab's sociopolitical landscape and key political organizing in transnational contexts contributed to shifting dynamics between the Sikh community and British imperialists. This chapter explores how the changing political space of Punjab gave rise to two influential anticolonial movements: the Babbar Akalis and the Kirti-Kisan Party. Both political organizations offer interesting insights into the anticolonial practices of Sikhs in the early twentieth century in Punjab.

During the mid to late 1800s, the British garnered political control and influence over many *gurdwaras* through the employment of *mahants*, or managers, of a locality and/or religious site. In some cases, these *mahants* influenced the Sikh community through issuing statements of support for the British in moments when pro-British sentiments wavered (G. Singh 1997: 3). In response to the rising British-funded luxurious lifestyles of the *mahants*, several political movements emerged to challenge their control in Sikh spaces, including the Nirankari Movement, Namdhari Movement, and the most influential, the Singh Sabha Movement. These socioreligious movements served to unify the Sikh identity into one that would withstand the influences of the British, Christianity, and Hinduism.

At the turn of the century, Punjab experienced an increase in nationalist sentiments. Peasants were distraught over agrarian conditions, while elite Sikhs demanded separate Sikh representation in the Punjab government, educational committees, and religious spaces. Subsequently, the political situation rapidly declined for the British administration in Punjab as the Sikh community grew agitated. On April 13, 1919, Baisakhi Day, thousands of Sikhs gathered at the Golden Temple in Amritsar to celebrate the auspicious day. Sikh leaders organized a peaceful meeting regarding the political situation in Jallianwala Bagh, a public garden located in the Golden Temple complex. As the meeting began, acting British general Reginald Edward Harry Dyer issued open fire on the unarmed public, killing 379 people and wounding 2000 (Narain 1998; Wagner 2019). The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre increased anti-British feelings amongst anticolonialists in Punjab and those who were previously apathetic towards state-endorsed Sikh organizations and political leaders. The massacre

initiated a new era of activism that centered on enhancing political rights and representation. For instance, the public highly supported the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), an organization that advocated for separate Sikh leadership and rights (Singh 2013). The committee garnered control over the Golden Temple, as well as other *gurdwaras*, removing the British supported *mahants*. On November 15, 1920, a *hukumnama* was issued from the *Akal Takht* summoning an assembly of the Sikh community to elect members of the committee who would best represent the sociopolitical interests of Sikhs in Punjab (R. Singh 1997: 14).

Alongside the establishment of the SGPC, the Shiromani Akali Dal formed by unifying the separate *Akali Jathas* that advocated for *gurdwara* reform (Dilgiri 2000). The Shiromani Akali Dal organized to rid Sikh religious spaces of *mahants* and bring them under Sikh leadership. In 1925, through strictly nonviolent means, the Shiromani Akali Dal successfully advocated for the Gurdwara Act, which enacted that all Sikh historical religious spaces be managed and supervised by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). While this movement solidified Sikh political representation, it challenged the diversity in Sikh identities by curating what garnered a true “Sikh” (Oberoi 1997).

Demands for Sikh social and political representation also led to the establishment of the Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD) on October 30, 1902, which advocated for the Sikh community in the socio-political arena of colonial Punjab. Growing out of the Amritsar Singh Sabha movement, the CKD believed in lobbying for Sikh interests by retaining amicable relationships with British officials (Mandair 2016: 77). As a key milestone in the political career of the CKD, in 1909 the organization successfully campaigned for the Anand Karaj Act, which recognized the legal validity of Sikh marriage rituals. By extension of the Singh Sabha movement, the CKD also promoted a singular Sikh identity, which could challenge influences from Christian missionaries and the Hindu and Muslim communities. This newly defined Sikh identity was to be digestible to British officials in exchange for political representation in government, such as Punjab government and Congress (Barrier 2002: 37).

Histories on the political legacies of the Chief Khalsa Diwan are largely centered around its alliances with the British government and efforts to consolidate Sikh factions into a unified Sikh religious identity. However, the CKD also worked to solidify a notion of the *secular* in Punjab’s sociopolitical-religious landscape through its efforts to discredit anticolonial movements, such as the Ghadar Party, by branding them as “fallen-Sikhs.” The loyalist nature of the CKD’s political agenda compelled it to label Sikh anticolonial organizations as “seditious” (Barrier 2002: 42). Historian Harish Puri claims,

When the Ghadarites returned to propagate and launch a rebellion against British rule, the Chief Khalsa Diwan assumed the role of a vanguard of the British rule for the suppression of the Ghadarites. The *mahants* and *pujaris* whose own fall from Sikh norms was provoking the community’s contempt and anger, condemned the Ghadarites as *patit* Sikhs and enemies of the *panth*, or Sikh nation.

(Puri 2012: 46)

Arguably this was done to undercut the political reach of other rising Sikh movements; however, it is specifically the CKD’s allegation that these organizations were not “Sikh,” which introduces the boundaries of not only the *religious* but also the *secular* in Punjab-Sikh politics and activism. The more political representation the Sikh community gained through organizations like the CKD, the more they had to create an alternative “fallen-Sikh” identity, one that did not uphold Sikh values or that of a decent British colonial subject. The processes of creating boundaries around religious identity must also include an introduction of the secular in a sociopolitical landscape. In colonial

spaces we see that the secular/non-secular divide, which was introduced by the project of colonial modernity, was greatly deepened by religious institutions themselves.

In association to the *gurduwara* reform movements and activism in Punjab led by the more dominant Singh Sabha Movement, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, and later by the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Babbar Akali Jathas stood out in stark contrast. While the Shrimonai Akali Dal leadership and the SGPC advocated for peaceful means towards *gurduwara* reform, the Babbar Akalis were heavily influenced by the militant tactics of the Ghadar Party. The Ghadar Party's mutiny of 1914 brought back to Punjab hundreds of revolutionaries who had spent years laboring and politically organizing abroad. Despite the high numbers of arrests in 1914–1915 and the seemingly apathetic response to the mutiny by the larger Punjabi public, individuals involved in the Ghadar movement had significant impact on the evolving political activism in Punjab in the 1920s and 1930s. Punjabi political activism and anticolonialism in the early twentieth century helped shape the politics of Punjab so greatly that its effects can be witnessed in the current Kisan Morcha, or the Farmers and Laborers Protest. The Ghadar Party, Babbar Akalis, and the Kirti-Kisan Party have each influenced protest practices and farmer-laborer relationships in meaningful ways that have persisted in today's political and labor context. The following section of this chapter will focus on the political trajectory of the Babbar Akali movement and its relationship to the Ghadar Party, followed by a history of the rise of communism in Punjab.

Babbar Akali Movement

Disillusioned and unconvinced by the peaceful protesting tactics of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Babbar Akali movement took inspiration from the militant past of the Ghadar Party. In 1921, the Babbar Akalis broke from the larger and more mainstream Akali movement in order to adopt more militant tactics to eradicate the physical and political presence of British imperialism in Punjab. The movement also utilized *Sikhi* to gain support from the local Sikh community and claimed that they were fighting to reinstate a Sikh empire in the region. In particular, the movement garnered support from former Ghadar Party members and the batches of Sikh soldiers returning from World War I. Over the course of four years, the members killed British informers, loyalists, and British officials before eventually coming to a halt in 1926. The Babbar Akali movement's sudden growth in membership soon after the fracturing of the Ghadar Party in 1918 points the direct influences the Party had on this Sikh-centered movement. Even though Sikh political organizations like the Chief Khalsa Diwan had written off the Ghadar Party as "fallen-Sikhs," the Ghadar Party's political influences on explicitly Sikh-identifying organizations calls for an interrogation of the formations of the secular and the non-secular in the anticolonial politics and activism of Punjab in the early twentieth century. The proceeding section provides a history of the rise of the Babbar Akali movement and its political relationship with the Ghadar Party and British-endorsed Sikh religious institutions.

In the early summer of 1921, the Babbar Akali Jatha made its initial introductions to the Punjabi public through meetings at the Sikh Educational Conference in Hoshiarpur. According to an official British Criminal Investigation Department report, these meetings were attended by Master Mota Singh, Kishan Singh, Amar Singh, Tota Singh Peshawari, Gurbachan Singh, Buttan Singh, as well as many other returned immigrants from North America (Singh 2015: 131). Thus, the meeting not only took inspiration from the Ghadar Party, but many of its former members were at the center of its political activities. These initial meetings depicted how the Babbar Akali movement separated itself from the Akali Dal and the SGPC. The members advocated for generating an uprising in Patiala, maintaining strong connections with the Bolsheviks to foment trouble in Central Punjab, to collect arms, ammunition, and men, and to eliminate all those seen as enemies of the *Khalsa Panth*.

While the Babbar Akalis borrowed several key ideologies from the Ghadar Party, they assessed its shortcomings, which primarily constituted Ghadar's inability to garner Sikh support in Punjab. To avoid similar pitfalls, the Babbar Akali movement considered focusing heavily on propaganda and taking control of Sikh religious and political spaces of influence. In many ways this was like the objectives of Shiromani Akali Dal; however, countering reformist tactics, the Babbar Akalis called for the physical annihilation of the British Raj and its supporters.

Not only did the Babbar Akalis wish to eliminate the British administration in power, but they also planned to attack supporters of the Raj that profited off the British as well, including *lambadars*, *zamindars*, *mahants*, *patwaris*, and police informers. While their critique of capitalistic systems and the exploitive nature of the colonial economy was not at the center of the Babbar Akali agenda, it was still a system of oppression that was openly challenged. In a speech appearing in the revolutionary journal *Bande Mataram*, Babbar Akali leader Master Mota Singh described the overburdened life of the peasant as being exploited by the British system of private property (Singh 1923). Mota Singh argued that an abolishment of private property would mean freedom from the oppressions of taxes and rent. Therefore, in order to completely free a nation, it should get rid of landlordism and capitalism. In Mota Singh's critique of capitalism, and more specifically landlordism, the Babbar Akali leaders extended the Ghadar movement's ideas on freedom to include more concrete visions of what a "free" space would entail. Alongside it being a Sikh space, this new nation would also be critical and unaccepting of Western capitalism as an economic and political system.

The propaganda of the Babbar Akali movement was distributed both through oral and written means. Utilizing the Sikh traveling story-telling medium of *diwans*, the movement attempted to branch out of the scope of the Doaba region in Punjab. The movement also turned towards distributing their message through their journal titled *Maghi* (Sidhu and Waraich 2007). *Maghi* conceptualized activism through a Sikh lens and invoked the revolutionary spirit of the Sikh community. Contrary to the Ghadar Party's demand that all Indians unite and keep their faith private, in *Maghi*, the Babbar Akalis urged Hindus and Muslims to join the *Khalsa*. However, as had occurred with the Ghadar Party, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the SGPC sent out public advisements to Sikhs to distance themselves from the Babbar Akali movement. As key managers of Sikh identity, these two organizations divided the Babbars from the Sikh identity and pushed the movement's reputation into the realm of heretics.

As the Babbar Akali movement gained traction in the Doaba region, Babbar member Kishan Singh brought together several Babbar Jathas on December 25, 1922, in the village of Jassowal (Singh 2015: 136). Their rise in popularity over the course of a year called for material action by the Babbars in order to maintain their support. Thus, the committee decided on the following terms: the working committee would determine who would be murdered, whether loyalist or a British official; children and women would not be harmed; valuables would not be taken unless approved by the committee; only those who committed to killing a British official and/or loyalist could be a Babbar member; those killed would be listed on Babbar publications, and all funding collected would be used towards buying arms and ammunition (Isemonger, 1923). These points regarding the Babbar Akali "reform" were published in the *Babbar Akali Doaba Akhbar* in December of 1922, and the first victim of the movement was a retired official of the Canal Department named Bishan Singh who was killed on February 10, 1923 (Sidhu and Waraich 2007). Shortly after the killing, there was a steep rise in fear among the British officials and supporters for their safety. While many Sikhs remained loyal and sympathetic to the Babbar cause, some wealthy Sikhs created special committees in their villages in support of the British and preached about the "blessings" of British rule for the citizens of Punjab – historian Mohinder Singh points out that the British were even described as having been blessed by the Sikh Gurus (Singh 2015).

Over the next three months, the Babbar Akalis executed numerous British loyalists, causing a spur of panic among Sikh elites and the British administration. Greater pressure was placed upon authorities to arrest Babbar members, including special Criminal Investigation Department (CID) staff. It has been noted that airplanes with propaganda were flown over the Doaba region, which distributed pamphlets expressing loyalist rhetoric in order to counter the rising popularity of the Babbar Akalis and anti-British sentiment in the area. The Babbar Akali members were declared an “unlawful association” under the Criminal Law Act of 1908, and local communities were offered cash awards for any information that would aid in the capture and arrest of any Babbar affiliates. Initially, despite arrests made of key Babbar Akali leaders during the months of August to November in 1923, the Babbar Akali movement continued to execute British supporters and preach anti-British sentiment in Punjab. Eventually, their strength and popularity wavered as the Punjab government advised the police to adopt stricter measures, including raiding suspected Babbar Akali hideouts and homes. By mid-June in 1924, 186 arrests were made, and 25 of those arrested were charged with murder. By the early summer of 1924, key members of the Babbar Akali movement were either arrested or killed in police encounters, successfully suppressing Babbar Akali activity in Punjab.

Nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and the SGPC each issued statements of disapproval of the Babbar Akali members and their violent tactics. The Punjab government used such statements of disassociation as encouragement to not only repress the Babbar Akali movement but also to enforce harsher punishments like execution for its members. At the time, Babbar Akali leaders claimed that the Akali Dal had bargained with the British Government for the release of its members in exchange for a “free-hand” in the Babbar trials. Babbar leader Master Mota Singh and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha accused the SGPC of “giving a green signal to the Panjab Government for the execution of the Babbar Akalis” (Singh 2015: 142). Even though the Akali Dal attempted to distance itself from the Babbar Akalis, the latter movement allowed for the Akali Dal to gain leverage with the Punjab government, increasing its future likelihood for political negotiations.

Despite the Babbar Akali movement being largely unrecognized in anticolonial and political activist narratives, its case shows the ways in which the transnational nature of the Ghadar movement managed to heavily influence the political climate in Punjab. In particular, it was the movement’s relationship with both Ghadar and Sikh religious institutions that is striking. The Babbar case depicts the changing notions of “Sikh” identity in anticolonial thought and political activism in the early twentieth century. Though the movement centered its identity largely around *Sikhi* and Sikh history, the disapproval from Sikh managing committees forced it into a realm labeled “fallen-Sikh” (while in some instances the British are even labeled as more “Sikh”). The Babbar Akali movement illuminates not only how movements like Ghadar, with more diverse populations defined as “secular,” self-identifying Sikh-influenced movements, like the Babbar Akalis, are also categorized as outside of “religious.”

Kirti and the Kirti-Kisan Party

Following the two major criminal trials that occurred in India and the US, the Lahore Conspiracy Trials of 1915 and the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917, many Ghadarites returned to Punjab. Some of these former Ghadar members created and joined the Babbar Akali movement, taking key inspiration from the militant tactics of the Ghadar Party. Though the Babbar Akali movement only remained active from 1921 to 1923, it greatly impacted the political landscape of rural Punjab. Furthering this exploration on how *Sikhi* and transnational flows of labor affected anticolonial and activism in Punjab, this section discusses the dispersal of communism throughout in the region during the mid-1920s and highlights how communist thought formed an alliance with the

Sikh tradition to generate unique ways of imagining anticolonialism and activism. This section explores the histories of the *Kirti* journal and the trajectory of the Kirti-Kisan Party (which ultimately aligned with the Communist Party of Punjab in 1942). Navigating the early communist history in Punjab with the Ghadar movement as a starting point illuminate how the Sikh tradition influenced these social, political, and economic movements.

After the success of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, Ghadar members were inspired to bring revolution to their own rural homeland. As the Ghadar Party had already created valuable networks with Russian revolutionaries, the October Revolution served as a key moment when those seeds of communication could come to fruition. Newly appointed Soviet Russian leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, also known as Lenin, was highly aware of the rising anti-imperialist activities in the Eastern colonies. In fact, the establishment of the Third International (Comintern) in Moscow in 1920 was motivated to annihilate British imperialism in its entirety (Josh 1970: 43). On July 28, 1920, Lenin presented his colonial theses at the Second Comintern Congress, in which he argued that this was the specific moment for a “world revolution” to take over (Lenin 1966). Following Lenin’s statement, in September 1920 the Congress of the People of the East met in Baku, Azerbaijan, during which Comintern president Grigory Zinoviev conveyed the urgency of Lenin’s message as he stated the need for more uprisings in the East against the colonial powers. While Zinoviev’s call for revolution in the East inspired organizing activity on the ground in Punjab among former Ghadarites and Babbar Akali members, the British officials in India increased security and surveillance of Punjabi communication networks in efforts to repress communist activity. However, agrarian militancy struggles in Punjab remained largely unaffected. In fact, the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922 adopted the “Theses on the Eastern Question,” which particularly praised the Sikh militant movements in Punjab (Degres 1971: 386). Communist leaders in India, such as M.N. Roy, also found Punjab to be a perfect space for revolution as many Punjabis who trained with the British Army could be convinced to fight in a “proletarian army” (Josh 1970: 46). This is not the first time a revolutionary movement has considered turning the Punjabi British soldiers against the British Raj itself. The Ghadar Party also attempted to obtain the support of the Indian troops. Therefore, Punjab remained a space of highest potential for revolution, considering both sectors of its economy: peasantry and military.

While the major economies of the time in the province of Punjab were agriculture and the military, the Ghadar members had returned to India with a wide variety of experiences in different forms of labor abroad. In the United States, considering the racial and labor tensions upon arrival, many Ghadarites created deep connections with the Industrial Workers of the World, a workers’ trade union organization formed in the USA in 1905. The Ghadar movement’s initial association with leftist politics in North America originated through its interactions with the IWW. Thus, the Ghadar Party remained one of the few Indian anticolonial movements that also sought to counter labor oppressions, particularly in response to the racial tensions present amongst mill and farmworkers along the North American West Coast. Though the Ghadar Party’s critique of labor oppressions was not as fully formed as their critique of imperialism, they still introduced to the space of Punjab a unique discourse on peasant and laborer rights, as many of these men were peasants in Punjab and laborers abroad.

Though Punjab was largely an agrarian state, there were other forms of industry present in the province as well that depended on agriculture. Industrial employment in 1921 was at 21% and was dominated by the production of textiles, wood minerals, metal processing, and food production (Singh 1994: 20). By the early 1920s, Punjab’s economy had become highly complex and diverse. However, there remained a need to understand and critique how in the different sectors of labor, peasantry, and the military the colonized people of Punjab were being exploited. Thus, during this period, the Ghadarites communicated more directly with those involved in Russia’s revolution.

In the early 1920s the Ghadar Party took interest in the communist agenda and sent two representatives to the Fourth Communist International Congress held in Russia in November of 1922. After their visit, representatives Santokh and Rattan Singh recognized that they needed to communicate with the rising Akali *jathas* (groups) with the communist message. In May 1923, Ghadarite members from the Kabul, Afghanistan center, Gurmukh Singh and Udham Singh, approached the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in Amritsar, Punjab, with a proposal to create a *Sanjhiwal* (unified) *Association*, a Sikh-reformist organization that would be recognized by the Comintern Congress in Russia. Specifically, Rattan Singh served as a mediator between the Third International and local Akali *jathas* (Josh 1970: 63). Ultimately, five Ghadarites from Punjab were sent to the Russia to be trained under communist ideologies at the University for the Toilers of the East. Radicals in Punjab who had associations with the Ghadar Party and the Akali Movement maintained their own separate lines of communication with the Third International, outside the purview of more Western-educated, elite communist leaders like M.N. Roy.

Also leading the Punjabi-Russian alliance was Santokh Singh, a founding member of the Ghadar Party in Oregon in 1913. Singh played a vital role in attempting to collect arms from the Indo-China region during the Ghadar revolutionary attempt in 1915. However, amidst its failure in 1916, Singh returned to the United States and continued his activist work with the Ghadar movement. Eventually he was arrested and tried during the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917 in San Francisco, California, and was sentenced to 21 months of imprisonment at McNeil Island, off the coast of the state of Washington. Later in *Kirti*, he recalls his friendship with an American communist on the Island who shared communist texts and Marxist ideas with him, deeply influencing his desire to rally for the working class (*Kirti*, 1927). Upon his release, Santokh Singh urged other Ghadar members to study Marxist theory and learn Russian – he became an avid supporter of the Revolution in Russia. On return from his trip to Russia in May 1923, Singh was arrested and remained imprisoned in independent territory until December 1923, after which he was sent to serve the remaining two years of his sentence on house arrest in his village in Punjab (Josh 1970: 66). During those two years from 1924 to 1926, Santokh Singh immersed himself in learning about the local political situation and how to best organize a communist revolution on the ground. In early 1926, he moved to Amritsar with fellow Ghadar members Bhag Singh Canadian and Karam Singh Cheema and collaboratively began the publication of *Kirti*, a monthly magazine written in Gurmukhi, which expressed the need for a communist revolution that combined Ghadar's militancy, the Russian revolution's organization, and *Sikhi's* ideals (*Kirti*, 1926). The first issue of *Kirti* was published in February 1926.

In January of 1926, Santokh Singh sent out a message announcing the upcoming publication of *Kirti* in which he described the journal as the voice of Indian workers in India, Canada, and America and would be dedicated to the heroes and martyrs that “awakened sleeping India.” Created through funding received from Ghadar members and other Indian workers abroad, the *Kirti* would expand the anticolonial sentiment of Ghadar to include worker and labor rights issues. *Kirti* thus served as the first organized labor journal in northern South Asia (*Kirti*, 1926). British Criminal Investigation Department accounts reported that the first issue of *Kirti* advocated heavily for labor causes and consistently glorified the Ghadarites and the Babbar Akalis. British officials remained alarmed at how quickly the journal reached audiences in Russia and how effectively the Punjabi public took influence from its revolutionary message.

What made *Kirti* particularly unique, and subsequently quite popular, among revolutionary and public circles was its utilization of *Sikhi*. Since its first issue, *Kirti's* editor, Santokh Singh, made distinct note of how the preaching of egalitarianism in Sikh thought was very in line with the leftist agenda; therefore, rather than importing a foreign way of thinking, like Marxism, Punjab should

rely upon *Sikhi* to inform their newly rising communist society. The first issue of *Kirti* in February 1926 began with a *salok* from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which states, “To fulfill a particular task one should rely upon one’s own efforts” (*Kirti*, 1926). Also, in this initial issue of *Kirti*, Rashpal Singh writes that *Kirti* is dedicated to fighting for the rights of those who work with honest labor, or as it is phrased in the Sikh tradition *dasan nohan di kirt* (*Kirti*, 1926). Later in this issue it is also mentioned that writings of this journal are colored with “*panthic prem, quami dard, and vattan di mohabbet*” (*Kirti*, 1926).

In the next five issues of *Kirti* from March to September 1926, Santokh Singh discussed in detail how land distribution could change the life of the peasant, while also warning that Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement would ultimately fail because it did not challenge the oppressive system of capitalism. In his article titled “The Hardworking Peasant,” Singh states, “After careful understanding and thinking one has to accept and say that without a change in the existing division of land, the solution to the problem is impossible.” Through these publications, Santokh Singh attempted to bring communist ideas into the discourse of the everyday laborer – specifically so they could imagine another way to freedom outside of the Gandhian movement’s agenda. In the August 1926 issue of *Kirti*, Santokh Singh proposes that the solution to the land issue would be to institute large peasant companies that would be co-owned by a small local group, in which profits would be distributed equally and land cannot be rented to others outside of the present company.

Singh’s answer to the agrarian problem, stimulated quite a discussion amongst revolutionary circles in Punjab, and the larger Indian context. Many wrote in questions to the publishing house in Amritsar asking “Who is a *Kirti*? What are their objectives?” Santokh Singh proceeded to clarify the definition of *kirti* in an article titled “Current Confusions,” in which he states, “Anyone who does his work with his own hands and does not exploit others is a *Kirti*” (Josh, 68 & *Kirti*, 1926). Singh argued that while *kirti* means “laborer” in Punjabi, it also means “peasant” because both are exploited by the capitalists. Thus, Singh attempted to unify the struggle of the peasants in Punjab and laborers abroad, such as the Ghadarites, into one class called *kirti*. Thinking through the oppressions of Punjabis at home and abroad, Santokh Singh’s classification of *kirti* allows for a political revolution, as well as an economic one.

From May 1926 to August 1926, many of Santokh Singh’s writings advocated for an organization of the workers and peasants in Punjab like the Industrial Workers of the World. However, during this period, Santokh Singh was bedridden due to tuberculosis, causing his writings to be more theoretical, rather than speaking to the material problems of workers and peasants. Santokh Singh died on May 19, 1927, and was never able to fully bring to life an organization built on communist and Sikh ideals. However, as Bhagwan Josh states, “His [Santokh Singh’s] contribution lies in establishing an ideological centre, i.e., the first Punjabi magazine with socialist leanings, which for the first time expressed its concern on world politics, economic policy, and proletarian struggle throughout the world” (Josh 1970: 73). As Santokh Singh neared the end of his life, Sohan Singh Josh took control of the *Kirti* publication as its editor on January 21, 1927.

According to Sohan Singh Josh, “The *Kirti* represented the continuation of the Ghadar movement in a new way. The magazine was oriented towards Marxism” (Josh 1976: 11). Sohan Singh Josh’s new position as editor of *Kirti* issued in a new era of communist politics in the region. Josh himself had quite an active political trajectory. In his early twenties he was heavily involved in the Akali movement and was appointed as general secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal. However, finding their politics dogmatic, Josh moved away from the Akali *jathas* and became the first president of the *Kirti-Kisan Party*, also known as the Workers and Peasants Party, in 1928. He also co-founded the Nawjawan Bharat Sabha in 1928, a socialist organization in which renowned Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh was heavily involved. In January of 1927, Josh became editor of the *Kirti*

newsletter and brought in a Marxist agenda. In 1929, Josh was tried and convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy Trial, in which the British arrested anyone whom they labeled as “Bolshevik” under Section 121 of the Indian Penal Code, prohibiting anyone from conspiring against the sovereignty of British India. While in prison, Josh continued to organize around communist ideals and prisoner rights. Sohan Singh Josh remained a key figure in the communist struggles in Punjab until his death in July of 1982.

Through his early contributions to *Kirti*, Sohan Singh Josh linked the politics of Ghadar into Marxism. In his autobiography, Josh recalls a bedridden Santokh Singh advising Josh to “go cautiously” as he entered his role as the newly appointed editor of the journal (Josh 1976: 104). Josh interpreted Singh’s advice as he must organize workers and peasants collaboratively and with patience. Though Josh had contributed a few articles to *Kirti* in 1927 while it was still under the editorship of Santokh Singh, they had very little interaction or communication. After he was nominated to be the next editor of the newsletter, Josh studied the writings of Singh in order to understand the essence of the magazine. Josh concluded that Santokh Singh’s mission in establishing *Kirti* was to challenge British imperialism, present the principles of communism in a simple manner to the Punjabi public, and to honor the political activism of the Ghadar Party. For Josh, there were many core elements of Santokh Singh’s agenda he wanted to preserve under his new leadership over *Kirti*, including its efforts to spread a communist message across Punjab.

However, he recalls his inability to uphold Santokh Singh’s associations with *Sikhi* within the newsletter. His views on the Sikh tradition were that it was becoming dogmatic in the Punjabi political sphere, specifically the ways in which the Akali movement framed and confined what it meant to be Sikh was extremely troubling to him. Josh argued that these Sikh political movements were immensely exclusionary. He recalls the first issue of *Kirti*, in which Santokh Singh had included the Sikh scripture, “We shall fulfill our task with our own hands” (Josh 1991: 109). For Josh, this use of direct references to Sikh scriptures carried a particular bias that he felt would divide the working class and peasants and generate unnecessary communal divide. Making his shift to Marxism quite clear, Josh wrote on the title page of *Kirti* a different scripture from Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, “Proletarians of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!” (Josh 1991: 110). According to Josh, it was after he eliminated traces of the Sikh tradition and turned more towards Marxism that Hindu and Muslim workers and peasants began seeking out the writings of *Kirti*. Josh’s aversion to *Sikhi* and other non-secular traditions issues in a new era of politics in the Punjab province, which are significantly and overtly defined by the colonial secular and non-secular divide. Josh’s leadership of *Kirti*, though grounded in Marxism, offered a strong critique of how local Sikh political leaders and organizations were framing Sikh(i) as a unified and singular identity and tradition. He also highlights how the colonial associations of *Sikhi* with the Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script has aided in the confinement of the Sikh identity. Sohan Singh Josh’s writings demanded the need to understand how these concepts are being formulated and influenced by colonial powers.

In his efforts to create a political movement for the rights of workers and peasants, Sohan Singh Josh organized the first *Kirti*-Kisan (Worker-Peasant) Conference in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, on October 6–7 in 1927. Supported by a few Akali leaders and the Indian National Congress, the Conference adopted resolutions to organize a party of peasants and workers to fight for India’s national freedom; create branches in every district of Punjab; support the Chinese and Russian liberation struggles; create a standard for an eight-hour workday for factory workers; and create solidarity with other labor movements, like the Kanpur millworker strike (Josh 1970). The conference gained international attention, as the League Against Imperialism sent in a message of its support. Nearly seven months after the initial conference in April 1928, the *Kirti*-Kisan Party officially came into

existence. The newly formed Kirti-Kisan Party served to unite the many separated political movements into one organization: peasant, labor, and anti-imperialist movements. Sohan Singh Josh's editorship of *Kirti* and his establishment of the Kirti-Kisan Party issued in a new era of communist politics in Punjab. Specifically, his focus on unifying peasant, worker, and prisoner struggles generated new visions of unified organization in Punjab.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how the transnational Ghadar Party and the Sikh tradition influenced two important political sects and their activism in Punjab during the early twentieth century: the Babbar Akali movement and the Kirti-Kisan Party. Inspired by the Ghadar Party's militant tactics, from 1921 to 1926, the Babbar Akali movement pursued a revolution that sought to eradicate the British presence politically and physically in Punjab. From 1926 to 1928, the leftist journal *Kirti*, under the editorship of Santokh Singh, took the Ghadar movement's anticolonial agenda, Russia's revolutionary practices, and *Sikhi's* ideals to create a message of revolution that was very well received by the Punjabi-Sikh public. The journal was then not only financially supported by Ghadarites but ideologically informed Santokh Singh's demand for peasant and workers' rights. From 1928 onwards, Sohan Singh Josh joined *Kirti* as its editor and shifted the agenda from being based in *Sikhi* to Marxist theory. This was quite different from Santokh Singh, as he had advocated for taking inspiration from Russian revolutionary practices and not necessarily calling for an application of Marxist theory. Singh had argued that *Sikhi* should remain the central framework. However, for Josh, Marxism came to inform how he envisioned a free state of India and served to critique local Sikh political leadership.

Tracing the trajectory of these Sikh political movements in the early twentieth century illuminates how the Punjabi-Sikh revolutionary was grappling with varying visions of freedom and equality through multiple sets of knowledges and frameworks. Throughout the connected histories of the Babbar Akali movement, *Kirti*, and the Kirti-Kisan Party, we can see similarities in the current context. In the Kisan-Mazdoor Morcha, or the Farmers and Laborers Protest, there is a consolidated effort to connect the struggles of farmers and laborers in Punjab against repressive government practices. The use of self-published literature, like the *Trolley Times*, political organizing across social and political backgrounds, and critical conversations around landownership and laborer rights, carries a *gunj*, or echo, for freedom that is reminiscent of Punjab's anticolonialist past.

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AKAL TAKHT AND SIKH ACTIVISM

Amandeep Singh

Introduction

Akal Takht is the highest temporal institution of Sikhs inaugurated by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, to engage productively and ethically with the material world. Kirpal Singh and Kharak Singh remarks,

Sri Guru Hargobind laid the foundation of Sri Akal Takht (literally, “the seat of the timeless Lord”) close to Harimandir in consultation with Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas in the year 1609 CE. The word Takht means “a throne,” a sovereign chair of the State, a seat from where the state law is promulgated.

(Singh and Singh 2012: 171)

Being established by the Guru, Akal Takht acts as beacon of light to guide temporal praxis of Sikhs, intervening in political and nonpolitical worldly domains in diverse human activities. Virinder S. Kalra notes,

By constructing the Akal Takht (the immortal seat) in Darbar Sahib complex in Amritsar, which at the time was raised platform opposite the Harimandir (God’s temple), the Guru was signaling the importance of temporal power in balance with the spiritual.

(Kalra 2014: 262)

Perhaps, this is one of the primary reasons that Sikh polity and Sikh activism has often remained centered around the institution of Akal Takht since its inauguration.

However, despite a routine involvement in political affairs of Sikhs on a regular basis, scholars have noted a vacuum regarding the Akal Takht’s engagement with vital subjects like political ethics, economic disparity, aesthetics, human rights, ecology, Sikh sovereignty, and so on. Interestingly, these are topics constitutive of a worldview and likely to influence politics and activism. Scholars have sometimes rightly lamented the “delusional” political accountability that renders conceptual distortions about institutional functioning of Akal Takht. For example, Kharak Singh notes,

The Akal Takht is ill-equipped to cope with mounting complex problems like apostasy, challenges to Sikh identity, enquiries relating to *gurmat*, problems of Sikh diaspora, pressures from vested interests, etc. As a result, some vital issues facing the *Panth* are often neglected, while decisions on others are implemented more in their breach than in compliance. . . . It appears that under the present set-up and the present situation, it is difficult for the Akal Takht to keep the *Panth* together, much less to provide the guidance and lead expected from it.

(Singh 2021: 91)

In these circumstances Singh demands “radical reforms” and suggests some structural changes in institutional functioning of Akal Takht.

Within this broader context of the intertwined relationship between the institutional framework of Akal Takht and Sikh politics, this chapter examines the historical contexts and political underpinning offered in discourses on Akal Takht. Additionally, I examine the political dimensions of activism that encounters the modes of functioning of Akal Takht by expounding upon the Sikh concept of *Seva* that endeavors to stitch the Sikh worldview with the capitalistic value systems of the West. But I begin by introducing the foundational principles and functioning of Akal Takht in tradition, history, and Sikh memory.

Institution of Akal Takht in Sikh Tradition

“Across the Harimandir, he [referring to Guru Hargobind] built the Akal Takht (the throne of the timeless God), where, instead of chanting hymns of peace, the congregation heard ballads extolling feats of heroism, and instead of listening to religious discourses, discussed plans of military conquests,” notes Khushwant Singh (Singh 2014: 60–61). It is interesting to note that Harimandir Sahib, popularly known as the Golden Temple in Amritsar Punjab, is the seat of Sikh spirituality where only prayers and *kirtan* is performed throughout the day. Akal Takht on the other hand is the seat of Sikh temporality that faces Harimandir Sahib, established in connotation with *Miri* (temporality)-*Piri* (spirituality) concept of Sikh understanding reflecting a vital engagement with both temporal and spiritual affairs of human existence.

Classic literature on Sikh history renders detailed accounts of the background in which the institution of Akal Takht was inaugurated. For example, according to the Gurbilas literature, compiled by Bhagat Singh, “The [sixth] Guru personally laid the foundation of the Takht. No mason was employed in erecting its structure. [Baba] Buddha and [Bhai] Gurdas offered their services in its construction” (Singh 1997: 251). Pointing towards the foundational principles of Sikh conceptual-ity implicit in the inauguration of Akal Takht, two principal ideas can be culled from this poetic composition. First, the institutional spirit of Akal Takht was inaugurated and authorized with the Guru’s personal sanction. This is perhaps a central reason that individually and collectively Sikhs have historically beseeched Takht’s institutional intervention and authoritative sanction in deciding temporal matters that demand collective decision-making. Second, being inaugurated by the Guru, Akal Takht has a material entity in history. Unlike the Islamic political system of *Khilafah* or Caliph, that was dissolved in 1928, Akal Takht remains an institution of historical relevance that cannot be dissolved in capacity or authority with theoretical reasoning or any unwarranted historical circumstances. This enables and establishes Akal Takht as a central reference point on matters relating to the world.

Further, discussing the modes of operations at Akal Takht after the Guru period, especially during the Misl period after 1757, Hari Ram Gupta comments:

According to M'Gregor there was all harmony and peace. The Adi Granth and Dasam Granth were placed before them. Everybody paid homage to the Holy Scriptures. . . . An ardas or prayers was said by Akalis. . . . The Akali then announced, "Sardarji, this is a Gurmata." . . . Thereupon all animosities disappeared for the time being and an atmosphere of pure patriotism prevailed. . . . Problems facing the Panth were raised one by one. Discussion was there ample and plenty. During the discussion if any particular point stuck any member of a misl, he could convey it to his chief to bring it to the notice of the congregation, though anybody could speak directly. After prolonged debates and arguments five beloved ones were chosen on the basis of service and devotion to the Panth. They sought divine light to guide them. . . . The spokesman of the five beloved ones communicated their verdict to the presiding officer of the Akal Takht. He announced it, and it was unanimously accepted. There was no question of passing a gurmata by a majority of votes. After passing the gurmata a committee was appointed to see that gurmata was properly executed. The gurmata flourished for nearly one hundred years. The earliest political gurmata was held by Banda Bahadur before the battle of Sarhind 1710. The last political gurmata was held by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1809 before signing the Treaty of Amritsar.

(Gupta 2008: 384–385)

Historical accounts like that of Gupta, as I noted elsewhere, render fine details of procedures of calling the general assembly of congregations, known as *Sarbat Khalsa*, selection of a council of decision-making body of representatives who pass resolutions pertaining to the entire community, qualifications required for selection of members of decision-making body, etc.¹ What interests me here is not merely the procedures but the behavioral patterns that overshadowed the operational procedures vital for consensus building over temporal issues. Of note in these accounts is the disappearance of personal tensions rendering productive conditions for coordinating inclusive yet liberal decision-making processes. It becomes pertinent to inquire about the institutional ethos that shaped the Sikh body and imagination indispensable for following such unprecedented procedures in collective decision-making. Is there something about the Takht that allows for open debates but simultaneously overshadows the imagination and subjectivity of Sikhs for warding off personal egos, biases, prejudices, and aspirations for the cause of common good to resolve issues of temporal conditions?

To answer the question, it is important to delve further into the nature, functions, and meta-physical dimensions of Akal Takht from a fresh perspective. While foregrounding the institutional operations of Akal Takht in history, it is also vital to look upon the contours of our understanding about the Takht as we pay close attention to the coining of the term "Akal Takht." Therefore, let me first try to pay attention to understanding the meaning of the term Takht. Takht, translated as *Throne*, is a symbol of temporal authority underpinning the idea of a sovereign political authority. As a symbol of sovereign power, a throne represents an idea of absolute authority realizable in the figure of a monarch. In other words, a monarch symbolizes an institution of absolute power that stands superior to his subjects both in reason and power and therefore renders the justification of his authority validated in his material existence. The symbol of Takht participates in worldly affairs and asserts sovereign power in political capacity to intervene in and resolve such affairs and, therefore, remains representatively superior to all other forms of expression of power. However, being a worldly institution, the capacity and authority of Throne is subject to conditions and circumstances

of time and space. In short, a Throne embodies a sovereign historical entity that can flourish and decline according to the currents of time and space.

Paradoxical to the institution of a Throne, the term *Akal* is translated as *eternal* or *timeless* that in many ways remains extraordinarily inexplicable. This is to say that *Akal* is not simply a negation or any direct opposition to *Kal* (time). Rather it is exactly opposite to such understanding that allows for opening up another way to relate with time. The complexity of conceptual understanding of *Akal* in different ways has both allowed and restricted scholarly discourses. Indeed, the most recent explanation, with which I agree, is presented by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, who renders an interesting view on understanding the *Kal-Akal* dichotomy of time. He notes as follows:

The point of working with Sikh concepts is not to oppose or displace the historical approach, but rather to recognize the existence of alternative temporalities that can function alongside linear history in ways that potentially enrich its explanatory powers. By acknowledging the simultaneous coexistence of different orders of time with equally valid claims to reality, history's powers of narration are expanded, making it possible to proceed simultaneously on two distinct levels, two different ways of thinking and narrating the event.

(Mandair 2022: 16)

Akal in this context renders the possibility to think outside the contours of temporality and, therefore, remains beyond a linear understanding of events in chronological sequences of history. In other words, *Akal* offers an openness to revealing a spectral form of the historical limits rendering the enigmatic possibility for thinking beyond the limits of temporality and implied meanings of temporal sovereignty. I would refer to such understanding of *Akal* as “metahistorical.” *Akal*, or metahistorical forms of relating with time-space paradigm, carries a potential for considering the possibilities of human thinking beyond the set processes of historical limits that I shall continue to build upon.

The conceptual foundations of both *Akal* and *Takht* become available from the earlier discussion and signal towards the presentation of sovereign authority of temporal power within a metahistorical framework. From another perspective, the term *Akal Takht* rejects a direct relationship of human ego with power that allows for its anxious consolidation and self-assertion in the linear flow of history. Besides, it renders a potent mode for eschewing the political form of sovereignty that enables egocentric appropriation of political power often revealed through ideologies of nationalism, colonialism, or authoritarianism.

Two further questions arise from the previous discussion. First, how does the *Takht* become relevant in the political processes? Second, what is the idea of sovereignty that can be derived from the *Takht*? Interestingly both these discussions continuously overlap with activist correspondences through which heterogeneous relationships are produced within political spaces and academic discourses. Let me discuss each of these points in turn.

Political researchers need to draw a line between “routine political practices” informed by everyday power struggles on the one hand, and the idea of “the political” on the other.² Routine politics is widely modulated by the production of narratives based on ideological confrontations, identity formulations based on different factors, or on socioeconomic contours of political order that allow access to authority and power. Grappling with the struggles of “Self-Other” dichotomy, routine politics provides opportunity to reclaim a historical consciousness of the subject “Self” that remains in constant state of tension with “the other.” The political praxis produced within the possibilities of thinking and contextualizing worldview under the “pressures of routine politics” persist in spectral forms causing enigmatic articulations of the political. However, the political, according to my understanding postulates the recapitulation of social reality into a conceptual framework

thereby deepening human understanding by foregrounding the temporal worldview through empirical participation in diverse times and spaces.³ It allows us to think outside the contours of routine political events of history and, therefore, constitutes a theoretical idea that participates in the process of history-making through human action in history. Interestingly routine politics relies on the idea of The Political revealing an inner embeddedness of human sensibilities in desire to hegemonize power.

Referred to as *Miri*, the idea of The Political of Akal Takht introduces an openness of engagement in the process of history-making and simultaneously remains a guiding principle for human action in history. In many ways, the idea of *Miri* remains outside the purview for discussing political tensions, thereby promoting and upholding human life and its worldly existence at its core. Therefore, Akal Takht as an institution aid in extending and expanding expressions of life in temporal domains. These fuller expressions might include promotion of domains of arts, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, education, which are by default deeply embedded and vibrantly infused as an integral part of the temporal worldview of Sikh modes of human civilization.

Meanwhile, to rationalize and develop our understanding further, it is imperative to delve upon the idea of sovereignty enunciated through the institution of Akal Takht. Sovereignty, as understood in political terms, is primarily a conceptual idea that legitimates state's autonomy and right over its subjects. Sovereignty, as I discussed elsewhere, is a monistic idea that requires the formation of one sovereign, "the state."⁴ Historically, this idea of one sovereign, practiced in modern democratic political modes of governance, can be traced back to the peace of Westphalia 1648 and the political philosophy unveiled thereafter. The state, as the custodian of peace in the society, upholds the responsibility of well-being of society, including providing measures to uphold religious tolerance by asserting its coercive power, if needed. It is, therefore, the right of the state to decide what amount of religion can be allowed in public domain, in order to act as a neutral arbitrator between the religions.⁵ In order to act as a neutral arbitrator, an element of divorce between the state and religion was productively acclaimed and conceptually underpinned through secularism.

By reversing the internal logic of the modern secular state culled from historical conditions of Europe, traditional Indian and other non-Western forms of political theory call for a marriage between the temporal and spiritual domains of human life. However, on closer scrutiny, there is also a deeper concordance between the two conceptions as both rely on the idea of formation of one sovereign. Sovereignty of state, according to the Indian theory of governance, is not absolute and sacrosanct as conceptualized in Western secular theory of governance. In material practice its power and authority is conceptually drawn from the institution of *Purohita* signified in the personhood of the Priest, who is the custodian of divine knowledge and spirituality. Upholding *Dharma*, the *Purohita*, becomes an embodiment of conceptual ground as a Master Signifier who directs and guides the monarch to ensure verticality of human progress towards higher stages of intellectual and spiritual growth. Reversing the logic of Western modes of conceptualizing sovereignty, the Indian conceptualization of sovereignty is perhaps more subtle in its applied form of one sovereign – The *Purohita*.⁶

In contrast to both modern Western and traditional Indian modes of governance, the Sikh idea of sovereignty offers a third way that can potentially realize its conceptual functionality in future progress of human history. To fully appreciate this potentiality, the prevalent modes of relating with history need a reconsideration of established forms of understanding and imagining history both in historical becoming and continuous production of conceptual undercurrents. In doing so, the understanding of history is enabled to consider the collective experience of a people that remains pulsating in higher consciousness of their collective imagination. This has often compelled scholars of history to think of those elements of history that rupture an established order of their

understanding. This element of history remains in excess of its linear flow and should rather be conceptualized as meta-history or Akal form of history. Related to time and space in strictly linear modes of history, sovereignty is primarily a monistic idea seeking an indefinite redemption of one sovereign (either the state or the religion/Purohita) demarcated in structured understanding of linear history. Meta-history or Akal form of history, on the other hand, allows one to think of sovereignty in a different mode of subjectification that resists any form of historical entity to act as autonomous single sovereign. Such sovereignty adds an element of intuition into the human understanding of temporality and, therefore, remains open to engage with extra territorial or metaphysical formulations of history. Thus, the element of certainty within the process of historicizing human consciousness nurtures an element of vertical mobility allowing it to occur outside the coordinates of set locales. This allows Sikh history and imagination to remain irreducible within any form of set internal limits that are postulated with recalcitrant formulations well-structured within the chronological sequence of events. Such an opening allows Sikh conceptuality to hold true to the principles of *Miri-Piri* (Temporality-Spirituality), opening human psychology to consider possibilities beyond dominant-subjugate relationships and remain grounded as they overcome binaries of power struggles in history-making processes of routine politics.

Sikh doctrines bring forth the governing principles in the idea of two sovereigns or the idea of *dual sovereignty* incorporated in Guru Granth and Guru Panth. It is important to note that the domains of spirituality and temporality are considered independent in nature and Sikh conceptuality does not allow for subjugation of one over the other. Kapur Singh in this context notes the following:

Here are two forces which claim allegiance of men's souls on earth, the Truth and Morality as Religion, and the State as embodiment of mere utilitarian and secular politics. . . . The Guru does not assert that this perpetual dichotomy and antagonism of the Church and the State must be resolved, or even that it is capable of being resolved, by the suppression or subjugation of the one by the other; rather he appears to recognize their eternal antagonism and character and in this antagonism sees the hope and glory of Man, the social and political context in which the Sikh way of life is to be practiced. The church must perpetually correct and influence the state without aiming to destroy or absorb it, for, as the History shows the attempt of the one to oust the other, meets with no lasting success, and each of the two antagonistic entities arise again after having been crushed in vain and both appear anew as if bound together.

(Singh 2001: 193–194)

Such understanding allows for looking beyond ideological formulations, dismantling colonial constructions, and overcoming the obstacles of power consolidation in politics. Guru Granth is the sovereign in the metahistorical realm, while Guru Panth in the historical realm. Simultaneously no sanctification of any divine authority is assigned to any person/priest or an historical institution that can allow such an entity to usurp the functioning of the temporal domain. Considering the coherence of arguments in the formation of being compels us to rethink the possibilities of ego constructions that get mired within the metaphysical realm. Individual subjectivity thus formulated posits for remaining firmly disengaged in discourses of temporality, thereby remaining uninspired by personal desires, individual ambitions, and narcissist aspirations. The subjective positions and identities in metaphysical realms remain open to infinite possibilities of their regeneration in which death of every subjective position becomes possible at every moment. Historians and authors of the colonial era have often examined such modes of functioning at Akal Takht in its tradition, although

they have hesitated to fully appreciate or theorize the idea behind such functioning. For example, John Malcolm notes as follows:

The assembly, which is called the *Gúrumatá*, is convened by the *Acális*; and when the chiefs meet upon this solemn occasion, it is concluded that all private animosities cease, and that every man sacrifices his personal feelings at the shrine of general good; and, actuated by principles of pure patriotism, thinks of nothing but the interests of the religion, and commonwealth, to which he belongs.

(Malcom 1812/2007: 95–96)

Malcom stops after rendering these details of functioning, and he disengages with the subject on hand beyond a fact-finding exercise.

In short, the conceptual frameworks are left to be peeled from the layers of historical data while we try to get close to the spirit of collective imagination. With that background let me turn towards understanding the role of activism as it becomes available through imaginative constellations in which the institution of Akal Takht is invoked as an agency to build coherent narratives within these contextual settings.

Activism and Akal Takht

Of late activism has taken a central stage by carving social and political spaces that has allowed practitioners to exercise greater “freedom of religion” in the modern world. Besides, many activist organizations, including Sikh activist organizations, have been working in different domains, including human rights, feminist rights, legal rights, educational rights, all with a view to overcoming economic disparities, providing medical treatments, addressing ecological concerns, and so on. While most of the time Sikh activist organizations are involved in their respective domains of functioning, many times the institution of Akal Takht is invoked to undertake structural, functional, and organizational reforms in Sikh institutions, including within the Akal Takht itself.

Towards the end of 2015, news relating to the Sikhs was frequently discussed in national and international media. The central topic of discussion was the sacrilege of *Guru Granth Sahib* in Punjab as the Sikhs around the world registered shock and dismay at the regularity of such occurrences. This was followed by mass protests against the then Akali Government, as the Sikhs believed that the Akalis had failed to check sacrilegious incidents. While the protests were gaining momentum, two Sikhs were shot dead in police action against the protestors in Faridkot, Punjab. The mishandling and brutality of police measures created further resentment amongst Sikhs, and the issue became a turning point in the Akali politics that lost its base support amongst Sikh masses thereafter. During these protests the contestations for political power among various groups of Sikhs led to calling of Sarbat Khalsa near Tarn Taran, Amritsar, by some of these groups. As reported by Amandeep Sandhu, the Sarbat Khalsa was not convened through the Akal Takht, leaving the Sikh society by and large into a state of religiopolitical bewilderment (Sandhu 2015). Lamenting the conditions that led to religious discordance among Sikhs that further petrified with constant political tussle, activist organizations built a narrative that Akal Takht, as the highest seat of Sikh temporality, requires to be redeemed from political control of Punjab politics. An online campaign was initiated in this regard under the heading “Free Akal Takht Movement.” With its chief propagator, Harinder Singh of Sikh Research Institute in Texas, the movement achieved some degree of success during its initial stages, especially in the United States. Besides actively campaigning in the United States, these activists held meetings in the UK, Canada, Australia, and Malaysia that were attended by members of the local

Sangat. However, the claims made by the organizers – that the campaign represented the voice of all 30 million Sikh population around the world – was highly exaggerated and did not correspond to ground realities, leaving the organizers little choice but to confine the campaign to a web-based virtual entity with negligible sociopolitical resonance on the ground.⁷

The idea of emancipating the Akal Takht from political control of the SGPC and the Akalis resonated with many during the start of the campaign. At the same time, however, it also raised troubling questions that were left unanswered. Let me list a few before we move ahead in our discussion. Is it possible to imagine the exit of Akal Takht's functioning from political dispensations of Punjab when the Takht is a seat of Sikh temporality? What measures are being taken by the activists to ensure that Akal Takht would not be subverted to neo-liberal hegemony of capitalistic modernity with the value system borrowed from "the West" after the so-called "freeing of Akal Takht"? This is particularly relevant when scholars like Chantal Mouffe have particularly warned that "Everything is subordinated to the economic realm and the sovereignty of the market" (Mouffe 2005: 92). Second, is there some level of sociopolitical decentering involved within the campaign, which is intrinsically a political move to rewrite the coordinates of power politics to secure influence over Akal Takht's functioning, especially by those who migrated to affluent Western nations at the forefront of neoliberal capitalism?⁸ In other words, how has the campaign differed from routine politics of power struggle comparable to the debates on encounters of "West versus the Rest" that is discussed, debated, and problematized in postcolonial studies? Third, while the activists from the United States spearheaded the campaign to free up Akal Takht, how has their influence and assertions made undergirding pedagogy to foster the binding of Sikhi with Western and, most importantly, American value system? Would not such a campaign, as Rajbir Singh Judge and Jasdeep Singh Brar interrogate in a similar context, cause a "deep violence of forgetting embedded within this politics that not only sanctions American values and their regulatory might globally, but also integrate the foundational anti-blackness of Western subjectivity into the conceptual structure of Sikhism"? (Judge and Brar 2017: 1). Last, is it possible to legitimize the organization of Sarbat Khalsa (like the one conducted in 2015 and later in February 2016) according to Sikh doctrines by sidelining the involvement of Akal Takht? If such a possibility is considered valid, is it not antagonistic to the basic tenets of Takht's material manifestation as Guru Hargobind personally laid its foundation in physical form? Would such a move not constitute a similar ground to that of Islamic political system of Khilafah or Caliph that failed to hold its relevance in history by being a metaphysical idea rather than a real institution?

While the campaign pointed towards the synchronistic failures in Akal Takht's functioning, it [un]consciously ruptured deeper coherence between Sikh Sangat, Sikhi, and Akal Takht. It also brought forward the contingent ideas of unresolved tensions offering some degree of formative openness to look beyond set boundaries of thinking about the routine politics that remains deeply embedded within the campaign, besides contesting the functioning of the Takht. Nevertheless, at a broader level, it is compelling to understand the undercurrents of activism and its implied relationship with Akal Takht that I believe requires some degree of background conceptual underpinning.

Few elements are important to understand the modes of functioning of activism in general that would help us bridge this discussion on activism, Sikh doctrines, and the institution of Akal Takht. First, activism, as I understand it, involves human action in history that renders an opportunity to produce self-meaning through such action. The implied effort is consistent with the uplifting of human conditions and the enhancement of self-worth. Second, activism involves a consistent and dynamic production of social ethics that are constantly formulated through social action. Third, activism involves a sense of satisfaction, derivation of pleasure, and formation of desires. The pleasure so derived also involves an internalization of social morality that renders an opportunity to enhance self-worth through practical action in history. Self-worth gets further

enhanced in difficult situations where an activist intervenes to enhance possibilities and contestations thereby rendering actionable inputs in elimination of pain (mental, physical, social, political, economic, legal, and so on). Fourth, activism also contains an element of time in it. Building its edifice around the idea of progress of human conditions, there is a silent aspiration towards a future dream and an inherent inspiration to be an architect of social mobility. Fifth, there is an element of pedagogy that assists in acquiring attitudes, skills, and cultivation of individual conduct that assists in building narratives to realize one's natural responsibility to speak out against dogmas and control systems, thereby nurturing a sense of resistance against dominance of power and cultivating a perception of "human liberty." Last, activism propagates a sense of enlightenment of human thought. Fostering constant production of meanings, it propagates a sense of newness imparting a fresh outlook that resonates with the growth of one's psychology, as Kant defines it, from a self-bound tutelage towards a mature subject.

Considering these background features, let me comment briefly on the nature of Sikh activism and its role in propagating Sikh subjectivity that can engage differently with Akal Takht. As Foucault notes,

We know from our experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way to thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led to the return of the most dangerous traditions.

(Foucault 1997: 316)

Indeed, the outcome of the events that led to the Sarbat Khalsa meeting left a certain degree of distaste and its resultant aftermath remained, in practical terms, outside the preview of political utopias envisioned in its first meeting. This is precisely what Amandeep Sandhu pointed out while investigating "how the popular movement got subverted and the Sarbat Khalsa highjacked." A similar undertone is also reflected from the Free Akal Takht website, where only two of the five resolutions (Resolution #2 and Resolution #5) passed at the Sarbat Khalsa meeting are found to be finally endorsed on the website.⁹ In due course, the Sarbat Khalsa meetings, that were supposed to be convened every six months, could not continue after February 2016 and were eventually put off indefinitely thereafter (Rana 2016).

My interest here is not to underline or critically evaluate the successes or failures of Sarbat Khalsa or free Akal Takht movement for its ideological purposes. On the contrary, I attempt to question why and how, despite being engaged in "discovery of Self" in dialectics of dominance and resistance, activism became self-exhaustive in a wider historical framework? To answer this question, it may be helpful to consider activism beyond organized bodies of practice. In doing so, I rely upon the thesis of dual conception of time in historical and meta-historical frameworks, briefly discussed in the previous section.¹⁰ This distinction shall allow me to juxtapose activism and the Sikh doctrine of *seva* (service) in a theoretical framework thereby rendering an opportunity to tease out the conceptual background of *seva* sutured firmly in narratives of Sikh activism.

Activism, as can be traced from its features discussed previously, involves an action in historical time and is indeed an attempt to deal with temporal activities in material frameworks. Relying upon the binaries of ideological positions embodied in the ideas of dominance and resistance, activism is, therefore, a temporal activity involving human intervention in history that, as noted earlier, facilitates liberal progress of human subjectivity. In short, in its most basic form, activism has a political and ideological undercurrent that draws on the ethos of human freedom as an end. Being firmly sutured in historical currents, this end is widely promoted to facilitate a fuller realization of

a being and a society, that at different occasions, remains outside the preview of its higher meta-historical meaning to potentially realize its essence in *hukam*'s (Divine Will/Command) expanse.¹¹

Against many of these reasonable justifications, the Sikh conception of *seva* exceeds to remain outside the preview of historical scope of activism. More than the situational modes of understanding and responding to cause-effect relationships, *seva* forces to acknowledge the possibilities that remain outside the demands of historical structures. It deals with the demands of history not by being anxious of any ideological failures but by its inherent capacity to bestow these demands with possibilities of realizing *hukam* in human conditions. Thus, *seva* involves a penetration of meta-history into history imploring creative possibilities of opening history into its [un]possible expanse.¹²

The broader scope of activism for the most part remains confined in an historical materialism, or what Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair refers to as the “*Kal*-centric” conception of time and world, and thus fails to draw upon the metahistorical “*Akal*-centric” conception of immaterial existence (Mandair 2022). This renders activism with inherently failed capacity to transcend existential barriers to draw upon meta-history. This is primarily because the historical nature of activism engages partially in material world and wherever it fails to produce meanings because of its inherent limitation to engage differently with material world, it escapes to resolve the tensions of its required material action by theoretically drawing upon higher metaphysics of religious conceptions. This is perhaps the reason that the Free Akal Takht movement could not resonate well with the common imagination, as it failed to engage aptly at a sociocultural level with the kind of challenges posed by material existence of the Sikh masses. Instead, the most common explanation that renders support for an ideological fantasy is drawn from a calling to promote the idea of “*Guru*-centric” vision – an overarching conceptual constellation to suffice for any failures in social, political, or religious projects of Sikh activism. In philosophical understandings, the historical ontology of activism remains isolated and precluded from being converted into an epistemological framework and instead un-epistemic pedagogy takes over the barren open space left over for a so-called “practical” discourse.

Conclusion

Rethinking traditional modes of functioning of Akal Takht has allowed Sikh activists to debate and question the current modes of its institutional functioning in recent times. Nevertheless, without properly identifying and analyzing its ideological, spiritual, and philosophical underpinnings, certain Sikh activists have allowed themselves to imagine the Takht primarily as an institution of Sikh politics. Temporality and spirituality, conceptualized in the *Miri-Piri* domain and represented in Guru Panth and Guru Granth, are posited as two independent sovereign entities in the historical realm. Ignoring this distinction, Sikh politicians and activists draw upon the institution of Akal Takht while participating in routine power struggles. A regular complaint, emerging from these power struggles, by the wider Sikh community has been a political use of Akal Takht to gain personal political advantage that has led to Takht's confinement into a localized phenomenon.

Central to my arguments in this chapter is the ways to think about the Takht beyond the pressures of routine politics (including activist politics), so its universal essence could be envisioned and gleaned distinctly from handling of everyday situational crises. This, as I argued, can be undertaken by making a distinction between historical and metahistorical frameworks of time. Akal Takht fosters the convertibility of historical subjectivity into a metahistorical phenomenon that allows the penetration of meta-history into history. In other words, the Takht upholds the transcendence of subjectivity from historical to metahistorical realm, bestowing human action in history to proceed with a meta-historical thrust. Unfortunately, without making such distinction routine politics of power struggle and *Miri* as instituted in the Takht are joined together in a confused manner as Sikh

activism attempts to open new spaces in the Sikh imagination while continuing to dwell upon the politics of power and control. The failure to relate with the Takht through a metahistorical vision has continued to displace the possibility of imagining its institutional role and redeeming its temporal significance. Therefore, an epistemological engagement at a higher pedestal needs to be undertaken as a vital body of knowledge that can suffice and refine historical practices undertaken by Sikh politics and activism.

Notes

- 1 For more information, refer to Singh, Amandeep. *Akal Takht: Revisiting Miri in Political Imagination*. 2018. Amritsar: Naad Pargaas
- 2 I borrow my argument from Chantal Mouffe's distinction between "politics" and "the political." For further details see, Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political*. 2005. NY: Routledge, p. 8.
- 3 I have examined routine politics in further details while understanding the formations of human ego through genealogical inheritance. For more information, refer to, Singh, Amandeep. *Essays on Akal Takht, Introduction*. 2021. Amritsar: Naad Pargaas.
- 4 For more details refer to *Essays on Akal Takht, Introduction*. 2021. Amritsar: Naad Pargaas.
- 5 While I borrow my arguments from the works of many scholars, primary among them are *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007; *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes, Barnes and Noble, NY, 2004; *Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson, Verso, NY, 2006 etc
- 6 For more information on Indian theory of governance, refer to Ananda K Coomaraswamy's, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power, in the Indian theory of Government*, Ed: Keshavram N Lengar, Rama P Coomaraswamy, DK Printworld, New Delhi, 2013
- 7 For information, please visit www.freeakaltakht.org/. According to the website, the meetings for free Akal Takht movement were attended by few hundred Sikhs in which new formulas for making resolutions and building consensus were tested. Interestingly, no mention of any meetings with Sikhs in villages of Punjab or in states outside of Punjab or in middle east countries could be found on this website. Arguably these are the spaces where a substantial amount of Sikh population of economically and socially underprivileged Sikhs continue to have a reasonable presence.
- 8 Malaysia is the only exception in the list of the first world countries where the meetings for free Akal Takht movement were held
- 9 Interestingly Harinder Singh proclaimed the five resolutions from the Sarbat Khalsa stage in 2015. However, three of the five were dropped from endorsement online. For more information visit https://d3n8a8p-ro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/akaltakht/pages/57/attachments/original/1478542670/Diaspora_Polling_Brief.pdf?1478542670
- 10 A similar framework is being used by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair in his book *Violence and the Sikhs*, in which he theorizes a dual conception of time as Kal centric (which I call historical time) and Akal centric (meta-historical) modes of time
- 11 Similar point is being raised by Judge and Brar while noting, "Sikh organizations cultivate, what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls, cruel optimism, binding Sikhs to ways of life that are inimical to their own flourishing within the structure of the Guru's hukam (Will, Command) and outside haumai (egotism)." For more information, refer to Judge, Rajbir Singh, and Brar, Jasdeep Singh. 2017. Guru Nanak is not at the White House: An essay on the idea of Sikh-American redemption. *Sikh Formations*, p. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2017.1305944>
- 12 It would perhaps be a mistake to proclaim that activism is devoid of the element of *Seva*. But the political and ideological enunciation of activism is delimited by its historical expression that fails to redeem its essential character into a metahistorical realm.

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TRANSNATIONAL SIKH SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Colonial, National, and Sovereign Encounters

Harjeet Singh Grewal and Tejpal Singh Bainswal

Introduction

Social activism is the collective political action that is based upon shared beliefs and a sense of community that is taken up by common people coming together to advocate for and promote social change through the public sphere. It involves advocating for human or animal rights, gender activism, environment protection, questions about religiosity, and is increasingly associated with diverse types of political ideologies as well as academic activity – as such, it can be against global trends and lead to revolutionary activity. Many large-scale changes to society within the political sphere in the twentieth century such as decolonization, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women’s Rights Movement have been large-scale nonviolent collective action rooted in activist organizing (Weatherall 2022; Beck 2022; Johnston 2019; Pineda 2021). Significant technological changes and the advent of social media in the twenty-first century has seen a rise in activism, but questions remain whether this has enabled participatory democracy or whether such activism is largely performative (Losh 2022). There has been a common global trend towards decentralizing governance and focusing on local forms of decision-making about resource allocation, governmental regulations, and long-term planning. Alongside this, increasing engagement and dialogue through the public sphere had occurred, leading to greater pressure being applied to ensure governments and industry are acting responsibly (Takahashi 2020). However, governments have often worked alongside corporate interests to criminalize or racialize forms of activism and dissent – a trend that has a history in the process of decolonization but has spread across the Global South and is increasingly prevalent in the Global North (Weis 2021; Keskinen 2022).

Until recently, social and political advocacy by the global Sikh community has been interpreted as a form of religious activism. However, critiques offered by Mandair (2009, 2011, 2018) and Bhogal (2007, 2013, 2014) about the dominance of religion as a master sign in Sikh studies have led to more dynamic forms of scholarly analysis and debate. In this chapter we follow the paradigm established by Jasjit Singh where the term activism and radicalism are separated to productively open a space to discuss a willingness to “engage in legal and nonviolent political action” through the term Sikh social activism (2020a). Singh recognizes that the numerous ways that Sikhs participate in debates in the public sphere and enter the public space to advocate for their own enfranchisement cannot be circumscribed using the category “religious activism” or other interconnected terms

that emphasize that actions in the public are religiously motivated and, following secular logic, are therefore perceived as threatening to the state. Following Gunning and Jackson (2011), Singh summarizes how religious activism is associated with religiously motivated actions such as a focus on a transcendent utopian ideal, a return to an idealized society, employing a symbolic violence inspired by God, and the evocation of total commitment from believers to counter the skepticism of secular humanists. Singh adds to this by drawing upon Christian Smith's work, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (1996). Smith understands religious activism as including moral imperatives developed through doxa, the use of symbols, rituals, and testimony. These factors contribute to religious asceticism activism by creating a keen sense of exceptionalism, a financial and institutional support system, and a shared religious identity. Singh shows how Sikh social activism deals with issues of disrespect (*beadbi*), doctrinal debates, the imbrication of metaphysical and temporal humanistic ideals (*miri/piri*), and a history of violent resistance (*shaheedi*). Drawing on existing data and qualitative analysis to examine what motivates Sikh social activity, Singh states that the codification of Sikh activity does not easily fit within the secular-religion binary. Sikh social activism is not captured fully through the category of religious activism. Singh identifies six terrains through which Sikhs get involved in activism: (1) social justice; (2) humanitarian relief, (3) religious enforcement, (4) diasporic nationalism, (5) community defense, and (6) factional/personal disputes. These are not seen as fully distinct categories, but when applied together, they can be used to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates major moments of Sikh activism.

Following 9/11, forums for Sikh activism have increased, and organizations like the Sikh Coalition and the Sikh Activist Network gained prominence in the aftermath of 9/11 (Luthra 2018). This interest has evolved to include how millennial Sikhs choose to engage in forms of struggle like environmental activism (Prill 2015; Mooney 2018). The engagement of Sikhs in democratic public spheres in the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada, and India has been noted in recent years as has the commitment to international humanitarian relief through organizations like Khalsa Aid increased in prominence during the COVID pandemic. However, Sikh activity in the public sphere is conceptually constrained by being thought of as "religious activism" leading to Sikh political activity being co-opted by what Cavanaugh calls "the myth of religious violence" (2009). Indeed, scholars are starting to recognize that Sikh activism is often in response to violence and marginalization from being perceived as a religious or ethnic minority in the varying nation-state contexts that Sikhs community finds itself in globally (Kurien 2018; Falcone 2006; Luthra 2018). This chapter begins by grounding Sikh activism in early Sikh history and Sikh thought. The next section looks at the rise of Sikh activism in the twentieth century. Finally, we examine the recent Kisan Morcha, a protest three farm laws passed by India's central government between November 2020 and December 2021. We adopt Singh's schematic to describe some of the seminal events connected to Sikh activism during the Kisan Morcha.

Early Sikh History, Gurbani, and Activism

The need to advocate to bring about positive political or social change is deeply embedded within the Sikh history, and Sikhs have been inspired to mobilize against tyranny or injustice repeatedly because of the teachings found in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Thus, the source of Sikh activism can be found in the scriptural language, or gurbani, and the historical examples of the Sikh Gurus, Shaheeds ("martyrs"), and important Sevadars ("servants"). Sikhs have rallied behind social causes since Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, in the fifteenth century. Tejpal Singh Bainiwal notes that Guru Nanak "embodied the *sant sipahi* (saint-warrior) ideology and consistently spoke out against systematic oppression from the Mughal government and Brahmin supremacy. He was

an activist, a revolutionary, a troublemaker” (2022a: 5). Guru Nanak challenged the social order by “rejecting Their family’s and society’s investment in caste and class as systems for attaining liberation,” including the rejection of the *janeu* at an early age (Kaur and Kehal 2020). Guru Nanak had established a legacy of advocating for and promoting social change.

During the height of the Mughal Empire, Sikh Gurus and Panthic leaders stood against injustice and oppression, which, at times, led to their persecution. When the Mughal government forced unnecessary taxes upon its citizens, Guru Arjan paved the way by refusing to comply. As the popularity of the Sikh Gurus continued to rise, Guru Hargobind was imprisoned for promoting social change amongst the common people when deciding to take up arms. Upon being granted bail and given the right to leave the Gwalior prison, he refused unless the other unjustly imprisoned inmates were given the same right. The ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, continued this pursuit for a just society by challenging Emperor Aurangzeb, who had imposed Islamic laws and taxes on non-Muslims. In 1675, a group of Brahmin pandits (scholars) from Kashmir visited Anandpur seeking the Guru’s help against Aurangzeb’s oppressive measures and threats of forced conversion to Islam. The Guru sent a message to Aurangzeb saying if he could be converted, the pandits will follow suit. Guru Tegh Bahadur marched to Delhi with a small group of dedicated Sikhs. To convert the Guru, the government tortured and executed Bhai Mattidas, Bhai Sattidas, and Bhai Dayala – the Guru’s closest confidants. On November 11, 1675, Guru Tegh Bahadur was publicly beheaded after refusing to abandon his faith. Following the execution of his father, Guru Gobind carried on his legacy through the establishment of the Khalsa, which embodied concepts found in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

Although colonial narratives in Sikh studies did not acknowledge these martyrdoms as social activism, today they are increasingly considered to be based on humanistic Sikh values and activism. The lingual engine of thought in Gursikhi is the language of *gurbani* and Sikhs are inspired through this language to engage in social and political activism. History and collective memory of social activism are often discussed through stories (*sakhis*) that connect events to concepts from *gurbani*. In discussing the rise of Sikh feminism, Luthra suggests that these feminists “have taken up the mantle of Guru Nanak’s denunciation of the subjugation of women, as a means for transforming practices in a community that traditionally segregated and disempowered women” (2018: 291). Gayer notes that Sikh women combatants for the Khalistan movement

often drew inspiration from historical figures of Sikh female warriors. As they were confronted with strict norms of sexual segregation and female modesty, they found inspiration and legitimation in women fighters and rulers of the past, whose feats have been eulogised in the Punjabi folklore.

(2019: 162)

The most popular figure for Sikh women from history being Mai Bhago, leader of Sikh armies in the early eighteenth century.

In the face of oppression, “Sikhs are inspired by the values and ideals of *seva*, *mīrī-pīrī*, the *sant-sipāhī* (warrior-saints), and other aspects of an engaged, critical, protest, or resistance tradition within Sikhism” (Mooney 2018: 319). Thus, the teachings found in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and exemplified by the righteous actions of the Sikh Gurus together enable Sikhs to struggle against injustice globally. Several scholars have showcased the influence that the language and conceptuality found in *gurbani* has on Sikh activism through different hymns (Bainiwal 2022a; Takhar 2018; Prill 2015; Singh N 2022; Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016). The use of *gurbani* reflect how the daily practices of *nam simran*, *kirtan*, and *katha* provide regular exposure to *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and its

conceptuality for practicing Sikhs. When faced with injustice, Sikhs can draw upon what they have been exposed to in their practices to inspire them to move into the public sphere.

The Struggle for Sovereignty and Sikh Activism

Prior to the Farmers' Protest, scholarship on Sikh activism focused on a few topics, such as post-1984 and post-9/11 mobilization. In the twentieth century Sikh activism is marked by migration and sociopolitical issues connected to Punjab. After Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kingdom was annexed in 1849, Sikhs in Punjab began a resistance movement against British colonial rule. The Khalsa Army had been defeated by the British in the Anglo-Sikhs Wars through stratagem, and the remaining *jathas* that led resistance were actively pursued. At the same time, the British recognized Sikhs as a martial race and actively courted their participation in the Imperial Army by creating several incentives while encouraging Sikhs to adhere strictly to the Khalsa ideal. This usurpation and reconfiguration of the Khalsa as an instrument of biopower by the British was meant to ensure Sikhs were loyal to the Raj. In the end, however, a contestation over Sikh subjectivity developed. The colonial period witnessed the impoverishment of Punjab as well as the occurrence of droughts, famine, and disease. Sikhs would start to migrate in search of economic opportunity and work across parts of the British Empire that they had access to partially through their favored position as elite soldiers in the British Army. Sikh activism occurred through a connected strategy of struggling for greater freedom within the existing political system by protesting discriminatory practices and attempting to reassert sovereignty through the Khalsa's humanistic governing paradigms to reestablish control over the Punjab. Thus, being an initiated Sikh – or member of the Khalsa – was at once a way to be an equal subject in the British Empire and a sovereign nation. The tension inherent in articulating this led to a contestation about Sikh identity that acts as a crucible for developments of Sikh activism in the twentieth century. The conditions of coloniality produced what Kurien recently describes as “Sikh transmigrants,” where Sikh actions and agency are embedded within a network of relationships and concerns that connect them across two or more nation-states (Kurien, Prema 2018). Thus, global, and transnational factors shaped Sikh activism in the twentieth century that compels many Sikhs to participate in struggle towards what Mignolo and Walsh refer to as a pluriversal and interval form of decoloniality (2018).

Anticolonial resistance increased amongst Sikhs, in part, due to experiences of Anti-Asian racism directed at Japanese, Chinese, and Indian laborer in the United States and Canada. Unions helped working class whites increase their salaries leaving business owners to entice low-wage laborers from Japan, China, and India to undercut the White Anglo-Saxon worker – with whom they otherwise expressed race solidarity. This created tensions between White and Asian workers, leading to the formation of Anti-Asian associations on the West Coast in British Columbia and Washington. This hostility culminated with the racially motivated 1907 Anti-Asian Riots. An interview published in the *Times of India* on October 7, 1907, expresses the paradox between racial hatred and pragmatic economic need by stating that however much people disliked migrant laborers, “all who hope to see the province rapidly developed are agreed that he is necessary . . . so long as the supply of white labour is kept short” (1907: 9). Orientals were seen as productive laborers who helped businesses keep their “wages bill down.” At the same time, they were discriminated against for being radically different, unassimilable, and disloyal for sending remittances from their meagre wages to “alien countries.” Their alienness created resentment: “it is admitted that Asiatics make law-abiding and industrious citizens, but ‘they have nothing in common with our institutions’” (1907). As Kurien notes, the routinization of such racism coupled with dehumanizing labor exploitation produced a “rejection-identification” that led to stronger ethnic identification. For Sikhs who had

worked in the British Army, this racism produced conflicting attempts to reactively identify with Sikhi as a religious identity and Aryanness while distancing themselves from being associated with Asiatics (Kurien 2022; Gill 2014). The reaction of Sikhs to this racism, their attempts, and failures to be recognized as equal “British Subjects” would sediment into a transnational anticolonial activism and a struggle for the reestablishment of Sikh sovereignty.

The Continuous Journey Regulation of 1908 was created and sought to address the concerns about the influx of Japanese immigrants and prevent migrant laborers from South Asia to enter Canada. Following the 1907 riots, Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier’s government worked with their Japanese counterparts to reduce immigration. However, the concerns of ministers like Mackenzie King extended to “Hindu” migrants who were thought to be unemployable and ill-suited for Canada (Kelley and Trebilcock 2013). King, deputy minister of labor, was sent to England on a mission to discuss the problem of Oriental immigration. Given the high percentage of Sikhs in Canada, his report titled *Immigration to Canada from the Orient and Immigration from India* can be interpreted to be concerned with the increasing Sikh presence on the Pacific Coast. The problem, as described by King, was due to the dissemination of misleading literature in rural Punjab about opportunities of “fortune-making” in British Columbia alongside the desire of steamship owners to get commissions from increased ticket sales. In Canada, the activities of “the number one of two Brahmins, who were desirous of exploiting their fellow subjects” were combined with industrial concerns around labor wages to compel contracts for hire.

The report shows that by 1908 the “problem of Oriental Immigration” as expressed in this report was not directed at Japanese or Chinese laborers but at the Indian laborers who continued to arrive from Punjab – mainly Sikhs and some Muslims. Migrant laborers from India working at the Pacific Coast were from Punjab. It is estimated that 85% of the 5,762 immigrants who arrived between 1901 and 1910 were Sikh, another 13% were Muslim (Kurien 2018: 202). King writes that his counterparts in England readily understood the nature of the problem and felt that restricting Oriental immigration would ensure that “Canada remain a white man’s country” for economic, social, and political reasons (King 1908: 7). The “discontinuance” of immigration was legitimized in the following way:

It was clearly recognized in regard to emigration from India to Canada that the native of India is not a person suited to this country, that, accustomed as many of them are to the conditions of a tropical climate, and possessing manners and customs so unlike those of our own people, their inability to readily adapt themselves to surroundings entirely different could not do other than entail an amount of privation and suffering which render a discontinuance of such immigration most desirable in the interest of the Indians themselves. It was recognized, too, that the competition of this class of labour . . . might none the less . . . occasion considerable unrest among working men whose standard of comfort is of a higher order, and who, as citizens with family and civic obligations, have expenditures to meet and a status to maintain which the coolie immigrant is in a position wholly to ignore.

(pp. 7–8)

Race, caste, and competing business interests are, therefore, connected here to a constellation of other issues related to the movement of labor. The phylogenic mythology of race, alongside the fallacy that Canada was uninhabited, were operative in how the nation was perceived as belonging to the “white man.” The report outlines three goals for addressing the Oriental problem: it seeks to (1) follow the British tradition of “respect to the native races of India” while (2) strengthening the “bonds of association,” and thereby (3) promote the greater harmony of the whole. King deploys

the “harm principle” (Mill 1859) to argue that eliminating Indian (Sikh and Muslim) immigration based on “grounds of humanity” and “the economic reasons by which it is also supported” (p. 10). To restrict free movement within the empire, the report rhetoric uses liberalistic concerns for the inhumane conditions of Indian and racial phylogeny to limit the suffering of Sikh and Muslim migrant laborers.

Despite the creation of laws like the Continuous Journey Act (1908), the Pacific Coast, throughout the 1910s Anti-Asian sentiments rise. Coincident with this was an intensification in Sikh activism in reaction to discriminatory practices across the British Empire. For instance, anticolonial activists such as Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mewa Singh, and the Ghadar movement took a radical approach to free South Asia from British colonialism by any means necessary (Buffam 2021; Singh 2017). Sundar Singh, an early twentieth century Sikh migrant laborer, established a newspaper and engaged with politicians to advocate for equal treatment in Canada through the idea of imperial unity and identity as British subjects. In response to the increasing discrimination Sikhs faced in Canada after the passing of the Continuous Journey Act, Sundar Singh took a delegation of four with him from Vancouver to Ottawa in get a two-fold commitment from the government: (1) redress for existing discrimination against Sikhs settled in Canada and (2) repeal of the Continuous Journey Act. The government was unmoved, and later, during Robert Borden’s Conservative, government tightened restrictions (Gill 2014). The Komagata Maru incident of 1914, where Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims were Asians denied entry to Canada is another example of defiance and social activism in response to immigration restrictions (Smith and Mann 2016; Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016).

The sense of unbelonging in North America pushed Sikhs in America to struggle to become recognized as citizens rather than aliens, as exemplified by Bhagat Singh Thind. Thind was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, and active in the Ghadar movement. He enlisted in the US army during World War I, and after gaining an honorable discharge in 1918, he was given United States citizenship. Thind’s citizenship was revoked, and he found himself challenging the revocation up to the Supreme Court by claiming to be Caucasian. His lawyers argued that the Indian caste system ensured Thind’s racial purity as an Aryan, but this was rejected by unanimous decision stating that although he might be Caucasian, Thind was not white. Many Indians would be stripped of citizenship following this ruling and be reclassified as alien. The result of this ruling had economic consequences as well in places like California where the 1913 Alien Land Law prohibited aliens who were ineligible to be citizens from owning land (Kurien 2018). Moments like this in both Canada and the United States not only fueled the creation of a “reactive ethnicity” that compelled Sikh activism but led to the realization that sovereignty and the overthrowing of the British Empire in India would better guarantee the freedom and equality that Sikhs increasingly sought. Indeed, decisions like that taken by the Canadian government and the US Supreme Court while prompted by concerns about Sikh anticolonial activities and associations with the Ghadar movement fueled the desire for independence and freedom (Jensen 1998; Coulson 2015).

Decades later, in the 1960s once Sikhs began migrating in large numbers, Sikhs in the UK advocated for the right to wear a turban and kirpan (Singh 2020a; Bebbler 2017). Restrictions were loosened globally in the aftermath of World War II as the UK, Canada, and US were once more in need of low-wage laborers to assist with the postwar rebuilding and recovery. Wherever Sikh settled they had to engage in what Bebbler refers to as “turban activism,” campaigning for the right to receive exemptions associated with their right to wear the turban vis-à-vis concerns relating to employment, mobility, religious freedoms, and legal protections for minorities (2017: 569). Sikhs sought to determine how policies for social integration, race relations, minority “privilege,” impacted their community’s rights while avoiding creating resentment from the majority white populations in these countries. Their actions challenged assimilation of minorities in these countries. In the UK

Sikhs struggled for the fight for an exemption of motorcycle helmet laws beginning in the 1970s (Bebber 2017). As is typical of most Sikh activism, Sikhs had to challenge the same discriminatory laws repeatedly in different localities and governments. For instance, it was not until 1999 that Sikhs gained the right for a turban exemption while riding motorcycles in Canada, but this was only in the provinces of British Columbia and Manitoba. It was not until about 20 years later, in 2018, that Alberta and Ontario loosened their restrictions in April and October, respectively, also by court challenge (The Canadian Press 2018; CBC News 2018). As Bebbber has argued, while exemptions are eventually made, the process of public scrutiny and debate that such request often rely upon model minority mythology and compel Sikhs to perform acts consistent with this mythology such as charity drives or what Dhamoon calls “regulated inclusion” (Bebber 2017; Dhamoon 2013; Kaur 2021; Sikh Motorcycle Club USA 2022). Similar issues of “accommodation” or “tolerance” have been the focus of Sikh activism in Canada, where Sikh veterans fought for the right to wear turbans into Canadian Legions and fairly assessing refugee claims in the 1970s and 1980s (Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016). About a decade later, Baltej Singh Dhillon passed the RCMP exam with flying colors only to find himself embroiled in a debate about getting an exemption to the RCMP uniform for Sikhs. This case was met with an openly discriminatory campaign about protecting the RCMP as a “Canadian,” or white adjacent, institution. Pins were created and circulated that had phrases like, “Oh no! Say it ain’t so” and “Keep the RCMP Canadian” (Mann 2020).

Another major route for the development of transnational social activism amongst Sikhs was the attack on the Golden Temple complex in 1984 by the Indian Army. Young Sikhs, both male and female, took a leading role in trying to spread information about human rights violations. This continued through the early 1990s as the struggle for Khalistan, an independent state based on Sikh teaching and humanistic practices (Takhar 2018; Gayer 2019; Singh 2020a). Millennials have inherited the collective trauma of 1984, and some engage in what Gayer calls “high risk activism” to keep the memory of 1984 alive and to maintain their faith as a living principle at any cost (Gayer 2018). Part of this necessitated the use of the Internet to disseminate knowledge about 1984 that could not easily be accessed through traditional means due to proliferation of misinformation spread by the Indian state (Axel 2001; Nijhawan 2008). The Internet became a tool to facilitate Sikh feminist activism as an alternate space away from traditional institutions ensconced in male privilege (Jakobsh 2022).

Sikh activism spiked in United States as a direct result of the September 11 terrorist attack. Sikh organizations, such as the Sikh American Legal Defence and Education Fund (SALDEF) and Sikh Coalition, were all empowered to mobilize against racial discrimination and hate crimes (Singh 2018). Though Sikhs privately questioned their adopted nation, in the public eye, they expressed American patriotism and focused on education and seva events (Falcone 2006). They continuously utilized the concept of *chardhi kala* as a guide to resilience (Luthra 2021). Founded in 1996, SALDEF works to provide equal opportunities for and empower Sikh Americans by protecting civil rights, building dialogue, promoting civic and political participation, and upholding ideologies of social justice and religious freedom for all Americans. Given that SALDEF was already operating at the time, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, SALDEF was the only Sikh American organization to meet with the Secretary of Transportation (Bainiwal 2020). Second, the Sikh Coalition was founded by volunteers on the night of September 11, 2001, in response to a surge of violent attacks against Sikh Americans. While working to protect the constitutional right to practice one’s faith without fear, it has become the largest advocacy and community development organization for Sikhs in the United States.

Luthra describes the post 9/11 period as a “period of institution building and cultural revitalization” (2018: 293). The efforts were driven by Sikh millennials who broadened the scope to

discuss environmental issues and gender equality (Luthra 2018; Singh 2018; Prill 2015; Mooney 2018; Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016; Jakobsh 2022). For Singh, the millennial generation has “reshaped twenty-first-century Sikh identities . . . [allowing] for multiple ways to internalize and externalize one’s Sikh-ness (Sikhi)” (Singh 2018: 262). Karma Grow, a community garden and food bank, as well as Eco Sikhs, a holistic approach to environmental action, were both initiatives that “reflect diaspora and millennial Sikh engagements with the environment, ecology, and social justice” (Mooney 2018: 320). Despite the long tradition of environmental activism within the Sikh tradition dating back to the Gurus’ period, the work by such organizations has allowed for Sikh work on environmental issues to become more visible in the public eye (Prill 2015). Issues of gender, millennial Sikh activists in the diaspora have benefitted from the combination of being in the West as it allows them to embrace Sikhi, challenge traditional notions, and reshape Sikh identity (Singh 2018; Luthra 2017). Revisiting the Gurus’ period, or what Jakobsh refers to as the “Golden Age” of women’s rights and equality, has allowed millennial Sikh activists to bring domestic violence and women’s rights concerns to the forefront (Singh 2008; Luthra 2018; Jakobsh 2022). While gurdwaras continue to be led by elderly men in the community, Sikh organizations in post-9/11 America empowered Sikh women to create space and mobilize (Luthra 2017; Luthra 2018).

The Kisan Morcha and Transnational Sikh Activism

The Farmers’ Protest, or Kisan Morcha, began as farmers from Punjab and Haryana marched to India’s capital, Delhi, in late November 2020. The central government had unilaterally passed three controversial Farm Bills on September 20, 2020. From the initial stage of organizing there were shared concerns about the impact of the legislation from a variety of economic, political, and cultural factors that, at critical stages, would threaten the frail alliances that slowly developed after protesters arrived at the border of Delhi (Grewal and Bainsiwal 2022; Rai 2022; Singh and Singh 2022). The protests saw the rise of a host of young individuals who helped organize and maintain the protests from a grassroots level throughout the entire year when people were gathered at the borders of Delhi (Grewal and Bainsiwal 2022). Many other important facets of the protest such as the role of the Diaspora in staging protests and counterprotest internationally as well as the presence of Nihangs to defend protestors and maintain peace are also noteworthy (Grewal 2022). Lastly, the presence of women at the protest highlighted their significant role not just in the protest but as farmers themselves (Dhami 2022). The protest was able to cut across different segments and eventually gained a level of pan-Indian and global support routinely throughout the protest. With COVID lockdowns and a dire global economic downturn, the use of violence by police against a nonviolent farmer and labor protest not only caught the interest of scholars of the region and diasporic Sikhs across the world but also captured the attention of politicians, social activists, and entertainers internationally (Bainsiwal 2022c). In a pattern mirroring the Punjab and Haryana context, diasporic youth became interested in the politics of the protest and the refrains of a looming existential threat to Punjabi culture and to Sikhi, both of which have strong ties to farming and labor communities in the region. This protest can be seen as the convergence of several types of distinct forms of social activism that Sikhs engaged in globally upon a single protest site.

The scope, breadth, and impacts of the Morcha are yet to be fully examined despite the number of scholarly discussions and articles that have been produced. Topics such as the revival of the revolutionary spirit amongst Sikhs or the political mobilization during the 2022 Punjab elections and its connection to the Morcha will need time to fully develop, making it difficult to write anything

definitive. In his article, “Narratives in Action: Modelling the Types and Drivers of Sikh Activism in Diaspora,” Jasjit Singh (2020a) categorizes six types of Sikh activism:

- 1 Social Justice
- 2 Humanitarian
- 3 Religious Enforcement
- 4 Diaspora Nationalism
- 5 Community Defence
- 6 Personal/Factional

Singh (2020a) stresses the importance that these are not exclusive categories as Sikh activists may engage in more than one of these categories simultaneously. This was highlighted during the Farmers’ Protest as the protest brought forth a new sense of activism amongst all six categories. While the Farmers’ Protest was a much broader protest, it was led and sustained by Sikhs and Sikh values. We adopt Singh’s schema to critically analyze distinct aspects of the Morcha and showcase the potential for future studies on Sikh activism.

Sikh engagement in forms of social justice activism involves advocating for human and civil rights, raising these issues through protest, advocacy, and solidarity work with other marginalized communities. The Morcha witnessed the embrace of social justice activism through principles and teaching central to Sikhi. With the farmers and laborers marching to Delhi, the government made every attempt to halt the march before it reached the capital. Police installed barricades, ripped apart the road, and used violence against the peaceful protesters, violating several civil and human rights. With the rise of social media, videos and photos of Navdeep Singh climbing onto a police water cannon, shutting it off, and then jumping onto a tractor became viral (Singh 2020b). Police–protestor confrontations ensued as protestors persevered and eventually made it to the streets of Delhi (Bainiwal 2022c). Response to the violence varied as some were reminded of the way Sikhs have been treated in India, historically (Bainiwal 2022a).

Sikhs adopt humanitarian social activism to provide aid to communities in need – these initiatives highlight the concepts of *sewa* and *langar* within the Sikh community as well as the example of Bhai Ghanayya who gave water to wounded soldiers. Many Sikh organizations stepped into lead roles, in which they took the initiative to help as many people as possible. First, Khalsa Aid, a UK based humanitarian relief nonprofit with an international presence, is known for its mission to provide humanitarian aid in areas with civil unrest and areas affected by natural or manufactured disasters such as war, floods, and earthquakes. Second, United Sikhs is a United Nations affiliated, international nonprofit that focuses on humanitarian relief, human development, and advocacy organization, aimed at empowering those in need, especially disadvantaged and minority communities across the world. Third, United Sikh Mission is a philanthropic charitable organization incorporated in Southern California, United States, and has operations in Punjab, India. They are an organization that provides healthcare needs to eliminate medical illnesses that are preventable and educational opportunities to countries like India. These three organizations are a small sample of dozens of Sikh organizations that value the elements of eternal optimism and service inspired by communities for the benefit of all. In Delhi, Sikh organizations cleaned up the streets, planted trees, started informal schools for the youth, and served *langar* throughout the day (Singh B 2022; Bainiwal 2022b).

The aspect of religious enforcement refers to those forms of activism that are focused on ensuring Sikh institutions and lay practitioners are aware of and follow the Sikh Rehat Maryada. An important part of religious enforcement is the commitment of Sikh activist to speak out against acts of *beadbi* (disrespect/improper conduct) when dealing with matters pertaining to religion, as

such, but also to how interpersonal and collective relationships should be governed by principles of equity and justice advocated for through *gurbani*. During the Morcha, religious enforcement was vital for ensuring the safety and sanctity of religious objects as well as protestors. In October 2021, police discovered a body with a severed hand near the Singhu border. Along with the news of the body, a video began circulating in which a group of Nihangs interrogated the victim after he was accused of desecrating the *Guru Granth Sahib*. While there were many stories being circulated about the validity of the source, video, and crime, the act brought forth conversations surrounding *beadbi* within the context of the Farmers' Protest. Sikh activists, who connected the Farmers' Protest to a larger history of issues between Sikhs and oppressive regimes in Delhi, were repeatedly clashing with the leaders of the left-leaning Farmers' Unions – led by the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha – about the role of Sikhi within the protest. Visible Sikh symbols, such as the Nihangs and the Nishan Sahib, brought forth the revolutionary spirit amongst the Sikh masses and posed a threat to the government. At a moment during the protest, President Balbir Singh Rajewal of the Bharti Kisan Union had even called for the removal of Nihangs and Nishan Sahibs. The tension between Sikh activists and the left-leaning Sanyukt Kisan Morcha reached its peak when the Nishan Sahib was hung from an empty flagpole at the historic Red Fort on January 26, 2021, as the act was denounced. In November 2015, for the first time in nearly 30 years, Sikhs held Sarbat Khalsa following a series of *beadabis* in Punjab. These matters sparked a revival of the resistance spirit amongst Sikhs as they began to connect the protest to a longer history of struggle and revolution (Bainiwal 2022b; Singh G 2022; Deol 2022). The matter of the *beadbi* brought forth similar sentiments as the lack of justice in *beadbi* issues in Punjab became a major talking point following the murder of the culprit in October 2021. Though scholarship on *beadbi* issues is extremely limited, Sikhs constantly mobilize around the issue. In recent years, both before and after the Farmers' Protest, there have been multiple cases of *beadbi* that were unresolved leading to moments and movements of religious enforcement; the *beadbi* case at Burj Jawahar Singh Wala and Bargari have been significant in these protests (Jagga 2018; Mahal 2021; Sharma 2022). The aspect of religious enforcement has been a major point of mobilization for Sikhs in the past. The presence of Nihangs at the Morcha, during an act of *beadabi*, resulted in a swift act of justice. Thus, pushing Sikh activists to act against cases of *beadbi*.

Sikh activism known as diasporic nationalism is connected to the global expression, protests, and struggle for a sovereign Sikh state, referred to as Khalistan, based upon *gurbani* and *gurmat* – or Sikh teachings, ideals, and values. The Farmers' Protest has brought forth a revival of Sikh nationalism, which can be understood through three different cases: (1) the rise of Deep Sidhu, Waris Punjab De, and Amritpal Singh; (2) Sidhu Moosewala's "Panjab"; and (3) the feeling of unbelonging (Grewal 2022). First, Deep Sidhu, a vocal activist who played a prominent role in the preliminary stages and won the hearts of the Sikh youth before being banished by Union leaders, consistently expressed the need for Sikh sovereignty stating "while we respect all religions and faiths, the Nishan Sahib provides sovereignty to the Sikhs. There is no way we can part away from our sovereignty" (Sikh24 2020). Following the conclusion of the Farmers' Protest, Deep Sidhu remained adamant to continue to advocate for Punjab as he launched Waris Punjab De, an organization dedicated to fighting for Punjab, and threw his complete support behind Simranjit Singh Mann, leader of Shiromani Akali Dal Amritsar, for the 2022 Punjab elections (Singh P 2022). Mann has been the constant voice of Sikh sovereignty and Khalistan for the past several decades. While Deep Sidhu did not survive long enough to witness Mann's eventual victory, the establishment of Waris Punjab De provided a platform for others to rise. Following the death of Deep Sidhu, Waris Punjab De appointed Amritpal Singh from Dubai to lead the organization. Singh's rise came via social media as he began publishing his views and interacting with Sikhs from around the world. In August 2022, he left Dubai to return to Punjab and begin grassroots campaigns around the topics of displacement,

ecological degradation, and Punjab's drug epidemic. One month into his arrival, Amritpal Singh launched the GurBhai Lehar, a movement to return Sikhs to the Khalsa tradition and in hopes to raise the political consciousness of Punjab. The movement is garnering similarities to what happened in the early 1980s with Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. However, the government of India withheld his Twitter account which joins an extensive line of censorship regarding Sikhs and Sikh issues in India (Deol 2022; Bainiwal 2022a). The matter of Amritpal Singh and his grassroots campaign is still unfolding as we are writing this chapter, but in a manner of months, the movement has already addressed multiple issues, including connecting Punjab issues to diasporic Sikhs (The Waris Panjab De 2022).

Second, with Sidhu Moosewala, a prime example of how the Farmers' Protest re-sparked feelings of nationalism can be understood through his song "Panjab," which was released during the protest. While Moosewala's "Panjab" does not specifically mention anything related to the protests and farming, he utilizes it to connect the protest as part of a longer history of struggle and revolution (Deol 2022; Singh G 2022). The direct link to nationalism can be seen from the very beginning with the introduction being Bharpur Singh Balbir's legendary speech about the need of Sikh sovereignty from the 1980s (Bainiwal 2022b). Though Moosewala provided titbits of pro-Khalistan and pro-Punjab dialogue throughout the past two years, it was only recently that he began to share these messages actively and consistently. Moosewala was one of the few major artists in Punjab who was a vocal supporter of Khalistan. Two days before his assassination, Moosewala gave his final interview in which he expressed his full support for Khalistan. He also became heavily involved in politics as he ran for office with the Congress Party before shifting his support behind pro-Khalistan candidate, Simranjit Singh Mann. The California Sikh Youth Alliance, a youth group dedicated to Sikh causes, believes it was noteworthy that Moosewala's assassination was executed while Punjab was undergoing increased military presence in preparation for June 1984 commemorations in Amritsar. Furthermore, they fear that anyone who even mildly talks about Sikh causes or Khalistan is conveniently eliminated – connecting Deep Sidhu's accident and Moosewala's assassination to a longer history of censorship (Deol 2022).

Finally, there is a sense of unbelonging within the community. Sikhs in India were protesting on the streets of Delhi against three agricultural bills passed by the Indian government in September 2020. For decades, Sikhs have been persecuted by the Indian government. As for those in the diaspora, they have had to mobilize since migrating to their adopted nation. Kurien notes that Sikhs have been "very active in the U.S. public sphere around racial, ethnic, and religious rights over the past hundred years" (2018: 82). Meanwhile, Smith and Mann argue how Sundar Singh used the idea of imperial unity and identity as a British subject to advocate for equal treatment in Canada (2016). In recent years, post-9/11 America resulted in Sikh Americans feeling the need to "profess their American patriotism" in public while "privately [expressing] their disappointment in their adopted nation" (Falcone 2006: 92). During the same time of the protest, four Sikhs were killed in Indiana in April 2021. While the exact motive of the shooter was unknown, he knew that an overwhelming majority of employees at the FedEx facility were Sikhs. The ongoing threat of violence in India combined with the murders in America, a sense of unbelonging began to form amongst some Sikhs, leading individuals back to discussing the need for an independent state. The movement and events surrounding Amritpal Singh, the death of Sidhu Moosewala, and the sense of unbelonging is currently an untapped resource for potential scholarship on Sikh activism and diaspora nationalism.

Sikh activism associated with meeting the needs of community defence is meant to protect the community against real or perceived threats and ensure its continuity in perpetuity. There were two important groups involved in community defence during the Morcha: (1) Nihang Singh Jathas and (2) Sikh youth. During the Mughal rule in eighteenth century South Asia, Nihangs gained their

prominence as defenders of the community. A century later, they continued to vehemently defend the community amongst all enemies. British historian Lawrence James notes the following:

The object of fear was the Khalsa, the Sikh army. It was later described by (Lieutenant-General Sir Henry) Hardinge as Britain's "bravest and most warlike and most disruptive enemy in Asia," which was a fair assessment of its qualities.

(2000: 106)

From the eighteenth century to the present, the Khalsa army was the first line of defense. This continued during the Farmers' Protest as violence erupted at the hands of the government and police. Upon hearing about state violence at the border, Nihangs reached Delhi and formed a wall between the police and farmers (Grewal 2022; Bainiwal 2022b). While government-sponsored media sought to vilify Nihangs, visuals from songs of the resolutions and firsthand accounts from the border tell a different story as protestors celebrated their arrival (Bainiwal 2022b). The rich history of Nihangs being the defenders of the faith eased the minds of protestors.

The last form of Sikh activism is related to personal and/or factional disputes that are issues focused on control of gurdwaras or Sikh organizations/factions and, therefore, can be seen as matters internal to the community. The Morcha was in many ways a spontaneous reaction to the three farm bills. Nonetheless, we can see the formation of several factions during the early salvoes of the protest. Nihang Singhs, the Kisan Unions, and Sikh youth associated with Deep Sidhu or Lakha Sidhana helped to make the protest a large and impactful movement, but they also competed with one another to retain prominence during the protests (Grewal 2022; Grewal and Bainiwal 2022; Singh P 2022). Moreover, there were moments during the protest where internal factions within each of these groups were revealed. In many ways, these factions were important in ensuring the continuity of the protest and were used in attempts to keep the protestors unified. These matters are often part of the public sphere, however, as Sikhs often protest over institutional issues and have in the past had recourse to the judiciary. Following the maltreatment and vilification of Sikhs and Sikhi by Farmers' Union and some Sikh leaders, Sikh activists started grassroots campaigns to focus on Sikh-oriented issues (Bainiwal 2022b). The grassroots campaign sparked during the Farmers' Protest is highlighted by Prabhsharanbir Singh, who explores the disconnect between the discourses of left-leaning farm leaders and Deep Sidhu/Sikh activists' factions and rifts kept the Morcha going (Singh P 2022).

Conclusion

Since Guru Nanak, Sikhs have mobilized to advocate for and promote social change through the public sphere. We began by discussing the roots of Sikh activism being grounded in early Sikh history and Sikh thought. Through the teachings found in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the historical examples of the Sikh Gurus, Shaheeds, and important Sevadars, Sikhs continue to be inspired to mobilize against injustice. Then, we learn that discrimination produces activism, and in the Sikh case, it leads to Sikhs discussing identity. As a result of the work being done by several Sikh organizations and grassroots campaigns, there has been increasing scholarly interest in Sikh Activism expanding the scope of activism to focus on racial discrimination, hate crimes, environmental issues, and gender equality. Finally, we examine the recent Kisan Morcha through Jasjit Singh's six categories of activism: (1) social justice, (2) humanitarian relief, (3) religious enforcement, (4) diasporic nationalism, (5) community defense, and (6) Factional/Personal disputes. While the scope, breadth, and impacts of the Morcha are yet to be fully examined, we felt these categories of Singh would allow us to begin to address the potential of scholarship on Sikh activism in the future. Given how integral

activism is to Sikhs, the community has and always will advocate for change making it more difficult to provide the most recent updates through scholarship.

References and Further Readings

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PART V

Modern Literature and Exegesis



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SIKH INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS

Puninder Singh

Introduction

Sikh traditions of interpretation and explication of *gurbānī*, the words and thought of the Sikh *Gurūs* and other saints whose works are included in the Sikh scripture *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* (SGGS), are nearly as old the Sikh tradition itself. These traditions take various forms, including *gurbānī vīchār* (thought or contemplation on gurbani), *shabad arth* (meaning of individual words), *īkā* (commentary), *viākhia* (detailed exegesis), and *kathā* (oral exegesis). The aim of this chapter is to outline some of the major schools within the broad tradition of Sikh interpretation, along with some of their important figures and works. Taran Singh's *Gurbānī diān Viākhia Praṇālīn*, ("Methods of Commentary on Gurbani," Panjabi, 1980) was the first attempt at a systematic survey of the Sikh interpretive traditions and remains the comprehensive work on the subject. In this chapter we will adopt some of his categories of interpretive traditions and expand upon some areas that are beyond the scope of his work.

The Sikh interpretive traditions are products of, and reflect, the historical conditions in which they developed. Different times and places, with their characteristic diversities in social and political organization, have produced varied requirements for interpretation according to the needs of the developing Sikh *sangats*. This includes variations in language, form, and medium. Several schools of interpretation developed during the time of the Sikh Gurus (1469–1708 CE).

The colonial encounter and its new ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and technologies had a profound effect on the development of Sikh interpretive traditions and self-understanding. The previous primarily oral mode of transmission, where interpreters had direct contact with the sangats for whom they interpreted, was augmented, from the late nineteenth century onwards, with the development of new genres of writing that introduced primarily referential works, such as the dictionary, the grammar, and the encyclopedia into the interpretive field. Developments in communication technologies, from the first oral exegesis at Harmandir Sahib, to manuscripts, to the printing press, to audiovisual recordings, and most recently to broadcasting and streaming, have each been accompanied by shifts in forms of interpretation. This movement has not been unidirectional or teleological, however. The contemporary period, the introduction of new audiovisual technologies, has facilitated a return of various forms of oral exegesis.

Sahaj Pranālī

Sahaj Pranali refers to the mode of interpretation in which gurbani illuminates itself, or “interpretation of scripture by means of scripture” (P. Singh 2000: 243). As Taran Singh writes, *Sahaj Pranali* is guided by the principle that *Jap Ji Sāhib*, the first full composition that appears in the scripture, and the first Sikh daily prayer, is a commentary on *Mūl Mantar*, the highly condensed “root mantra” that opens the scripture, and the whole remainder of *SGGS* is in turn a commentary on *Jap Ji Sāhib* (T. Singh 1997: 23). There is evidence throughout *SGGS* that the Sikh Gurus and other saints were in conversation with each other through their compositions. One example of inter- and intra-textual commentary that appears in *SGGS* comes in the form of *shaloks*, or couplets that are frequently interspersed within and between longer compositions, or *shabads*. For example, Guru Nanak’s *Āsa dī Vār* (*Āsa dī Vār* is found in *SGGS* p. 462–475) which is composed of 24 *paurīs*, or verses, also contains within it a series of *shaloks*; 44 by Guru Nanak himself and 15 by Guru Angad. These were added by Guru Arjan as the *Adi Granth* was being composed. These additional *shaloks* help to unfold the meaning of the *paurīs* at appropriate places. In a similar vein, the *shaloks* of Baba Farid (found in *SGGS* p. 1377–1384), which number 112 in total, are also interspersed with 18 additional *shaloks* by Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, and Guru Arjan. It is of note that the additional *shaloks* follow the same form and meter as the *shaloks* of Baba Farid. These are not prose commentaries but additional works of gurbani that flow seamlessly with, and bring out further subtle dimensions of meaning from, Baba Farid’s originals.

Bhai Pranali

The *Bhai Pranali* is generally associated with Bhai Gurdas (c. 1550s–1636 CE), who is remembered in the tradition for his many contributions to the development of the early Sikh Panth. Bhai Gurdas served with four Sikh Gurus; Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, and Guru Hargobind. He is credited with having inscribed the first recension of *SGGS* under the supervision of Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1604 CE, as well as composing the first written exegetical works in the tradition. His writings are voluminous, including 40 longer verse compositions in the form of the *vaar*, and several hundred shorter verse compositions in the form of *kabitts* and *swaiye* on topics related to gurbani, and the Sikh way of life more generally, such as *naam*, *sangat*, the concept of the *gurmukh*, and more. Guru Arjan himself appointed Bhai Gurdas to perform daily *kathā* at Harmandir Sahib and called his works “*gurbani di kunji*,” or the “key to Gurbani.” The traditions of both oral and written exegesis were thus established contemporaneously with the *prakāsh*, or first revelation, of *SGGS*. The works of Bhai Gurdas remain in print even four centuries after they were written, and are still widely read, studied, and referred to in contemporary interpretive traditions. In them we find many details about gurbani and how it was interpreted during this relatively early period in the Sikh tradition, and about the social world, language, and customs of the time.

Although Taran Singh does not include him in this category, we would be remiss not to include here another “Bhai,” Bhai Nand Lal “Goya” (1633–1713 CE). The *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (“Sikh Code of Conduct”) of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the official gurdwara management body of the Sikh Panth, from the mid-twentieth century states that the only works that are authorized to be sung as *kīrtan* in Sikh gurdwaras are gurbani from *SGGS*, and the “*viākhiasarūp rachna*” (“the works in the form of commentary”) of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal (SGPC 1932: 15). Although Bhai Nand Lal is less well-known in the Sikh Panth today, this declaration by the SGPC speaks to his prior place of importance within the Sikh interpretive tradition. Bhai Nand Lal was born in Ghazni, in today’s Afghanistan, and moved to Multan as a youth where he was educated in Persian. He later moved to Delhi where he served briefly in Aurangzeb’s court

before making his way to Anandpur Sahib in the last decade of the eighteenth century to join Guru Gobind Singh's court as one of his celebrated "*bavanja kavi*," or "52 poets." Inspired by his encounter with Guru Gobind Singh, he wrote an extensive body of mystical works in Persian with distinctly Sikh thematic content, including *Zindagīnameh*, *Ganjnameh*, *Jōt Bigās*, and a body of *ghazals* known collectively as *Diwān-e-Goya*.

Bhai Nand Lal's work is not only important for its illumination of the mystical dimensions of gurbani and the Sikh way of life but is also a testament to the multilingual nature of the Sikh exegetical tradition during this early period. While the Sikh community has come to be increasingly associated exclusively with the Panjabi language from the late nineteenth century onwards, the evidence of the languages of SGGS and its early commentarial traditions indicate a much more capacious linguistic field. With the advent of the Partition in 1947, and in its wake diminished opportunities for education in Persian literature among Sikhs in east Panjab, unfortunately Bhai Nand Lal's works have become less accessible to the contemporary Sikh community in their original form. Yet they remain a vital part of the Sikh interpretive tradition, waiting to be rediscovered.

The Miharbān Janam-sākhi

The *Miharban Janam-sakhi* is comprised of three works, the *Sachkhand Pōthī*, the *Pōthī Harijī*, and the *Pōthī Chaturbhuj*. The first of these was composed by Manohar Das "Miharban" (1581–1640 CE), by whose name the collection is known, and the second and third works were composed by his sons, Harijī and Chaturbhuj, respectively. Miharban was the eldest son of Prithi Chand, the eldest son in turn of Guru Ram Das and elder brother of Guru Arjan. When the lineage of Sikh Gurus passed from Guru Ram Das to Guru Arjan, Prithi Chand developed an enmity towards the Sikh Panth and sought to create his own alternate Guru lineage. According to Bhai Santokh Singh's *Sūraj Prakāsh* (more on which later), Guru Arjan made overtures of reconciliation to Prithi Chand, but these were rejected. We do have an indication of how Prithi Chand's sect was regarded at the time, however, in the testimony of Bhai Gurdas, who referred to them as *Mīnās*, or "deceivers." The Minas have been regarded as a heterodox sect by the mainstream Sikh Panth since that time.

The Minas produced in the *Miharban Janam-sakhi* an expansive collection of exegetical work on gurbani during the seventeenth century. Despite their heterodox status, the works as they have come down to us today indicate little in the way of evidence of sectarianism. They are mostly made up of lengthy explanatory passages in prose in the form of *gosht*, or "discourse," on selections from gurbani, particularly the work of Guru Nanak. Though the works are referred to as *Janam-sakhis* (literally "birth-witness"; biographical or hagiographical stories), they are not quite *janam-sakhis* in the usual sense. Although they do contain some biographical or hagiographical details, these mostly form a backdrop for the extensive commentaries on scriptural passages. Since the Minas have been regarded as a heterodox group since their founding, their works were not widely distributed. They were only published in printed editions by Khalsa College, in two volumes, during the 1960s. For these reasons they likely did not have a major influence on the development of the Sikh interpretive traditions from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. However, they do retain historical value as being both some of the earliest works of the Sikh exegetical tradition, as well as being some of the earliest examples of Panjabi prose. For these reasons they still merit examination by scholars of religion and linguists alike.

Udāsī Panth

The Udasi Panth traces its lineage to Baba Sri Chand, the elder son of Guru Nanak. Most of the details of Baba Sri Chand's life are now shrouded in hagiographic accounts (for instance the assertion

that he lived for 150 years, from 1494 to 1643), but it seems that he and eventually his followers did embrace an ascetic lifestyle modelled after that of other *sadhū* ascetic orders. This embrace of asceticism was not in keeping with the *grihasta*, or householder, lifestyle emphasized by Guru Nanak and his designated successors in the line from Guru Angad onwards. Though Udasis regard SGGS as authoritative, they interpret it from a *Sanatan*, or traditionalist/orthodox point of view. Baba Sri Chand is usually portrayed in popular representations with blue skin, matted hair, and earrings, seated on a tiger skin, and with accessories such as a begging bowl, trident, and *damrū* (drum), all features clearly deriving from Shaivite imagery. The Udasi Panth represents historically a mode of dialogic engagement between the Sikh Panth and the broader world of Indian ascetic orders.

The Udasi Swami Anandghan (fl. eighteenth century) is credited with composing some of the first surviving *tikas* of gurbani, including *tikas* of *Jap Jī Sāhib* (1795 CE), *Āsa dī Vār* (1799 CE), as well as others, interpreted, again, through a *Sanatan* lens. The Udasis received a great deal of patronage under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century and established *akhāṛas*, or religious centers, around the North Indian region and as far as Nepal. They played an important role in spreading knowledge and awareness of SGGS and *Sikhī* in different areas of the subcontinent, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They established themselves as *mahants*, or caretakers of Sikh shrines, especially during times when the Khalsa Panth was engaged militarily and often on the move. These caretaking positions eventually became hereditary, leading to proprietary control over Sikh shrines. The Gurdwara Reform Movement of the early twentieth century was in part an effort to regain control gurdwaras from these hereditary *mahants* and restore them to the administration of the Sikh Panth. With the advent of the Gurdwara Reform Movement, shifting patterns of patronage, and the political reorganization of the Sikh Panth in the twentieth century, the role and influence of the Udasi orders was much diminished. Many of their *akharas* still remain across north India, however, the *Brahmbūṭa* akhara, adjacent to Harmandir Sahib, being one example.

Nirmalā Panth

According to the well-known legend of the founding of the Nirmala Panth, Guru Gobind Singh wished to introduce Sanskrit learning to his court at Anandpur Sahib but found that the local Brahmins would not teach Sanskrit to his Sikhs. He thus sent five Sikhs to Kashi dressed as *sadhus* to obtain knowledge of Sanskrit and the Vedas, who, when they returned, established the Nirmala Panth. Whether this story is historically true or not, its symbolic import is clear. As the Udasi Panth represents a mode of dialogic engagement between the Sikh Panth and Indic ascetic orders, the Nirmala Panth similarly represents a mode of engagement between the Sikh Panth and the Brahminical/Vedic orders. Where the Udasi Panth has been more focused on ascetic practice, the Nirmala Panth has been focused rather on scholarship and interpretation, both of SGGS and of traditional *Sanatan* Vedic, Puranic, and Shastric literature.

The Nirmala Panth also played a similar role as the Udasi Panth in the dissemination of knowledge and awareness of SGGS and *Sikhī* across the subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Malcolm in his *Sketch of the Sikhs* (1812) mentions that the Sikh texts that he had acquired during his stay in Panjab were explained to him by “a Sikh priest of the *Nirmala* order” in Calcutta (Malcolm 2007 [1812], 18, emphasis in original). Pandit Gulab Singh (b. 1732 CE), a prominent Nirmala scholar of the eighteenth century, known for his works *Prabōdh Chandra Nāṭak* and *Adhyātmik Ramāyana*, translations of Sanskrit works into the *Braj Bhāṣa* language, learned Sanskrit in Varanasi. This gives us some idea of the extent of the Nirmala Panth network during this period; their travels took them far beyond the borders of the Panjab region.

Bhai Santokh Singh (1787–1843) published his well-known *Srī Gur Partap Sūraj Granth*, colloquially known as *Sūraj Prakāsh*, a mytho-historical account of the Sikh Panth from its origins written in Braj Bhāṣa, in 1843. He is also known for his *Gurū Nānak Prakāsh* (1823) and his *Garb Ganjanī Ṭīka* (1829), a tika of *Jap Jī Sāhib* written directly in response to Swami Anandghan. Though both the Udasi Panth and Nirmala Panth are engaged with the Sanatan tradition, this engagement occurs from different perspectives. Where the Udasīs embrace the appearance and lifestyle of ascetics, for instance, Nirmalas are often *kēshdhārī*, though they do not participate in the *amrit* initiation ceremony of the Khalsa Panth and remain celibate. The dispute between Bhai Santokh Singh and Swami Anandghan speaks to their sectarian differences. The rivalry was not only ideological however; the two groups were also likely in competition for patronage during this time under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Bhai Santokh Singh's extensive knowledge of and reference to Vedantic, Puranic, and Shastric literature in his works speaks to both the Nirmala educational establishments that must have been in place by the early nineteenth century and also their view of the relationship between gurbani and other Indic traditions. According to their view, while *SGGS* was authoritative, it was best understood in the context of these other works of the Sanatan tradition. Other prominent Nirmala scholars of the nineteenth century include Pandit Tara Singh Narotam (1822–1891), known for his *Gurmat Nirnay Sāgar* (1877) and *Granth Gurū Girārth Kōsh* (1889), and Giani Gian Singh (1822–1921), who wrote *Panth Prakāsh* (1880), and *Tivārkh Gurū Khālsa* (1891). It should be noted that while the Nirmalas had and maintain their own institutions and forms of education, they have also been in communication with other members of the Sikh Panth. The works of Tara Singh Narotam and Giani Gian Singh, for instance, were highly influential on many of the prominent members of the Singh Sabha, as we will discuss further later.

Sampradāyī Pranālī

The Sampradāyī Pranālī is associated with and traces its lineage to Bhai Mani Singh (c. 1662–1734 CE). Bhai Mani Singh was closely associated with Guru Gobind Singh and is said to have received his knowledge of gurbani directly from him. He served as the scribe for the *Damdama Sāhib Vālī Bīr*, or the recension of *SGGS* dictated by Guru Gobind Singh at Damdama Sahib. The *janam-sakhi Gīan-Ratnāvalī* is also attributed to him, along with a *saṭik* of *Jap Jī Sāhib*. The Sampradāyī Pranālī has burgeoned into many interpretive schools, including those led by such figures as Giani Badan Singh, Giani Hazara Singh, Sant Ameer Singh, and Sant Sunder Singh. While there is no single interpretive rubric that encompasses them all, they all derive their authority and authenticity from a claimed unbroken chain of oral transmission going back to Bhai Mani Singh.

Sikh Interpretive Traditions in the Colonial Period

The colonial encounter, and especially the encounter with the English language and its attendant conceptual framework, had a profound influence on the Sikh interpretive traditions from the late nineteenth century onwards. The first attempt at a full translation of *Ādi Granth*, sponsored by the colonial government, was completed by German Indologist Ernest Trumpp in 1877. As is well-known, Trumpp's translation and commentary was marred by his self-professed inability or desire to understand, assess, or make sense of the content of *SGGS*, and as a result, it was not well received. Even before this translation was published, attempts had been underway by various Sikh groups to reassert a Sikh identity in the rapidly changing colonial context that in a very short time had up-ended traditional forms of patronage, scholarship, and education. The appearance of the translation

created an impetus to develop a new indigenous framework, one that was, however, inevitably imbricated with the colonial matrix and its new set of priorities, concepts, and methods.

In response to the publication of Trumpp's translation, Raja Bikram Singh of Faridkot commissioned Giani Badan Singh to write a commentary on *SGGS*. The commentary, the first on *SGGS* in full, came to be known as the Faridkot Tika and was completed in 1883. After its completion, a committee of learned Sikh scholars led by Mahant Sumer Singh of Patna Sahib was commissioned to review the manuscript, which was subsequently published only in 1905. Written in Braj Bhaṣa, the commentary interprets *SGGS* from the perspective of the Vedas and is thus continuous with Sanatan-inspired works of the Nirmala school of the earlier nineteenth century. It marks an important transition, however. In previous eras, when the orally mediated Sikh life-world had been immersed in performances and exegesis of *SGGS*, there had perhaps been no need for a full written commentary. In the new context of the late nineteenth century, however, with the institutions that supported the previous traditions of interpretation waning, a written and published full commentary had become a necessity.

The Faridkot Tika was not the only response to Trumpp's translation of 1877. Max Arthur Macauliffe also took up the project of responding to Trumpp. Macauliffe was born and educated in Ireland, joined the Indian Civil Service in 1862, and was stationed in Amritsar. He took an interest in Sikhi and in 1893 retired from his judicial post to take up the task of translating *SGGS* into English full time. The result was the massive six-volume work *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings, and Authors*, published in 1909. Macauliffe enjoined the assistance of several leading Sikh scholars in producing his translation, including Kahan Singh Nabha. Macauliffe notes that he undertook his project in part as a form of "reparations" to the Sikh community for the damage that Trumpp had caused with his translation. His further motivation was that "the old gyanis or professional interpreters of the Granth Sahib are dying out, and probably in another generation or two their sacred books will, owing to their enormous difficulty, be practically unintelligible even to otherwise educated Sikhs" (Macauliffe 1909, vii–viii). His exaggerated alarm notwithstanding, Macauliffe was describing a changing social situation introduced by colonialism in which the Sikh community and its associated languages and interpretive traditions were in a state of flux. His work marks an important event in the ongoing encounter between Sikhi and the English language.

The Singh Sabha Movement

In the late nineteenth century, in the context of the introduction of colonial systems of knowledge and governance, new economic forms, and aggressive Christian missionizing, all mediated through the English language, various religious groups, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, felt the need to respond to this novel set of challenges through programs of reflection, reorganization, and reform. Traditional Sikh schools of interpretation were diminishing in their influence due to the changing social conditions and patterns of patronage. The Sikh reform movement led by the associations known as the Singh Sabhas developed during the 1870s within this complex milieu. The Singh Sabha had a daunting task before it; it had to somehow distill the essence of Sikh thought from *SGGS* and other traditional materials and present it in such a way as to be both recognizable and compelling to the Sikh sangat, and at the same time to meet the political and social demands of the new colonial context.

The late nineteenth century was also characterized by the introduction of new technologies, particularly print technology, that in a few short years changed the landscape of knowledge production and transmission on the subcontinent. Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957), one of the most prolific and influential of the Singh Sabha scholars, was exemplary in this process. Born into a devout

Sikh family, as a youth he studied closely with his maternal grandfather, Giani Hazara Singh, who traced his scholarly lineage to Bhai Mani Singh. While attending Church Mission High School in Amritsar, Bhai Vir Singh witnessed several of his colleagues convert to Christianity. He felt that the changing colonial context and its new systems of education were leading Sikhs away from their own traditions, and he dedicated himself to spreading knowledge of Sikhi through the activities of writing and publishing. He began his working career at the Wazir Hind Press in Amritsar in 1892. While working at the press, he began developing several new genres of Panjabi writing through which he expressed his ideas. He founded the Khalsa Tract Society in 1894, penned the first novel in Panjabi, *Sundri*, in 1898, and started the *Khalsa Samachar* newspaper in 1899. He edited the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib Kōsh* that his grandfather Giani Hazara Singh had begun and published it in a revised form in 1927. He also engaged later in more traditional forms of exegesis, such as the tika, for instance in his *Santhya Srī Gurū Granth Sahib*, which remained incomplete at his death but was published posthumously. His *Jap Jī Sāhib Saṭik*, published separately, remains a standard reference work. However, it was through the new genres in contemporary Panjabi that he pioneered, particularly the tract, the novel, the newspaper, as well as a new contemporary style of poetry, that he effected a major shift in methods and modes of interpreting the Sikh tradition. Through his publications he disseminated information about Sikhi, Sikh history, interpretations of gurbani, and commentaries on contemporary issues and thus propelled the Sikh interpretive tradition from a culture of hand-written manuscripts and oral transmission into the print age, in which texts could be accessed and read without an intermediary.

Bhai Kahan Singh “Nabha” (1861–1938) was, like most of the prominent scholars of the Singh Sabha, an expert in multiple languages. He learned SGGS and the *Dasam Granth* while a youth, later mastering Sanskrit and English as well. As a young man he traveled to Delhi and then to Lahore to learn Persian. A meeting with Macauliffe in Rawalpindi in 1885 led to a lifelong collaboration between the two, particularly on the latter’s *The Sikh Religion*. Kahan Singh traveled to England with Macauliffe to help him finalize and publish his work. Later Macauliffe assigned its copyright to Kahan Singh. In 1887 Kahan Singh was appointed as a tutor to the young heir of the princely state of Nabha, where he also served in various other positions. From here, his scholarly work over the next several decades became one of the cornerstones of the Singh Sabha movement. His major contributions to the Sikh interpretive traditions were the series of reference works that he compiled from the 1890s onwards, including his *Gurmat Prabhākar* (1898), a glossary of Sikh terms, and *Gurmat Sudhākar* (1898), an anthology of important Sikh texts, and culminating in his *Gurshabad Ratnākar Mahān Kōsh*, which he began work on in 1912 and published in 1930. In his introduction to the *Mahān Kōsh*, Kahan Singh mentions that he was inspired in his work by Pandit Tara Singh Narotam’s *Granth Gurū Girārth Kōsh*, Giani Hazara Singh’s *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib Kōsh* (both mentioned previously), as well as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Kahan Singh was likely introduced to the latter work by Macauliffe, who wrote several entries on Sikhism for its eleventh edition. Kahan Singh’s massive reference work perhaps exemplifies more than any other work of the Singh Sabha period the interaction between traditional and colonial forms of knowledge and the new hybrid forms they produced.

Professor Teja Singh (1894–1958) was born and educated in Rawalpindi, where he learned gurbani, and also Urdu and Persian, and took MA degrees in English and history. He later joined Khalsa College in Amritsar, where he taught history, English literature, and other subjects. He authored numerous works in both English and Panjabi, including some translations of gurbani into English; his translation of *Jap Jī Sāhib* was published in 1919 and his translation of *Sukhmanī Sāhib*, under the title *The Psalm of Peace*, was published in 1938. In 1923, while serving time in jail for his role in agitations related to the Gurdwara Reform Movement, he began work on what would become

perhaps his most enduring contribution to the Sikh interpretative tradition, the *Shabdārth Sṛ Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī*, for which he was the principal author, in collaboration with Bawa Harkrishan Singh and Professor Narayan Singh. The work was published in four volumes from 1936 to 1941. The *Shabdārth*, as it is known, is formatted with pages corresponding to the full recension of SGGS on the left-hand side, with word meanings and short commentaries on selected words and passages whose meanings might be challenging for contemporary readers on the right side. The work thus combines elements of the shabad arth, or dictionary, with those of the tika, or commentary. The work was written, according to the introduction, because “difficulties” were occurring in performing and understanding SGGS (“*aukhīāi hō rahī hai*”). The work thus represents a new innovation in the genre of the tika within the Sikh tradition.

Professor Sahib Singh (1892–1977) was born into a Hindu family and, inspired by some Sikhs that he encountered while a youth, took it upon himself to follow the Sikh path. He mastered Sanskrit and became a lecturer at Khalsa College Gujranwala in 1917. In 1921 he was appointed joint secretary of the SGPC and took an active part in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, enduring jail twice, after the Guru ka Bagh and Jaito agitations. In 1929 he joined Khalsa College in Amritsar, where he remained as a professor until 1952. Sahib Singh is perhaps most well-known for his numerous tikas, or *saṭīks*, on various aspects of gurbani, which he published over the span of several decades, for instance his *Shalōk tē Shabad Farīd Jī Saṭīk* (1946), on the shaloks of Baba Farid, or his *Siddh Gōshṭ Saṭīk* (1953), on the composition of Guru Nanak. These commentaries culminated in his magisterial *Sṛ Gurū Granth Sāhib Darpaṇ* (1962–1964), a commentary on the full text of SGGS. In his commentary, he aimed specifically to provide a single correct meaning to each line, as opposed to the polysemous interpretations of previous traditions, particularly before the Singh Sabha period (cf. Shackle 2008: 272).

While his satiks presented some innovations in the interpretive process, they were still innovations in a traditional genre within the Sikh interpretive tradition. His *Gurbānī Viākaraṇ* (“Gurbani Grammar”), however, first published in 1932, in introducing a form of grammatical analysis, marked a clear departure from previous work in the tradition. It was the first attempt to create a single, unified grammar of SGGS in its entirety. This was a challenging task, given the multiple languages and dialects present in SGGS. In the introduction to his work, Sahib Singh pushes back on detractors that claimed that a comprehensive grammar of SGGS was not possible by stating that he could demonstrate the grammatical regularities in the text. Given his background in Sanskrit, it is perhaps not surprising that Sahib Singh makes use of the Sanskrit grammatical paradigm to compose his grammar of gurbani. For example, he employs the Sanskrit nominal case system, consisting of seven cases, plus the vocative case, to describe the nouns that appear in gurbani. Gurbani, however, given its linguistic diversity, does not always correspond neatly to Sanskrit grammatical structures. Notwithstanding this fact, it has been stated that “no exegetical work since the publication of this book [*Gurbānī Viākaraṇ*] . . . has been possible without resort to the fundamental principles enunciated in it” (W. Singh 1992: 22). In any case, Sahib Singh’s *Gurbānī Viākaraṇ* marks an important development in the Sikh interpretive tradition in the twentieth century.

At Khalsa College, Amritsar during the 1920s and 1930s then, a new Sikh intelligentsia coalesced around figures such as Teja Singh, Sahib Singh, and Bhai Jodh Singh, the historian Ganda Singh, the poet Mohan Singh, as well as others. These were cosmopolitan scholars whose backgrounds included extensive formal education, and the mastery of multiple languages, including English. Many of them participated actively in the Gurdwara Reform Movement during the 1920s and contributed through their written works to the Singh Sabha movement. This school marked a clear shift. Whereas in previous centuries Sikh interpretive traditions were developed and transmitted through traditional forms of education that took place in gurdwaras, dharamshalas, akharas, and *bungas*, by

the turn of the twentieth century, the site of the development of new interpretive traditions had moved into a professionalized education system consisting at first of colleges such as Khalsa College, and later, in the post-Partition period, a university system as well. While Kahan Singh belonged to an earlier generation, his *Mahān Kōsh* (1930) can be included among the group of works published in the 1930s that also includes *Gurbānī Viākaraṇ* (1932) and *Shabdārth* (1936–1941), that have remained in print since their publication, and still serve as standard works of reference within the tradition. Except for Sahib Singh's *Darpaṇ* (1962–1964), which can be regarded as a later entry in this same school of thought, no other grammar, commentary, dictionary, or encyclopedia has been produced within the tradition to date that has superseded these works in terms of breadth and authority.

The Contemporary Period

While the development of new schools of interpretation within the Sikh tradition has remained relatively static for nearly a century, a great deal of energy has been expended during that time on translation and on the transference of written materials from earlier eras in the tradition into new media forms. While translations are not quite the same as forms of exegesis, they are forms of meaning-making. The increasing out-migration of Sikhs into diasporic communities around the world, and particularly into anglophone contexts, during the long twentieth century, has now produced several generations of Sikhs whose primary engagement with the Sikh scripture is through the medium of English, necessitating the production of new translations. Whereas Trumpp's and Macauliffe's translations were aimed primarily at a British English-speaking audience, today's translations are aimed primarily at Sikh diasporic audiences whose first language is English. Teja Singh was among the first to attempt a complete translation of SGGS into English, though the project remained incomplete at his death. His unfinished work was later published as *The Holy Granth (Sri Raag to Raag Majh)* by Punjabi University in 1985. Several complete English translations of SGGS have been composed since the mid-twentieth century, including those of Gopal Singh (1960), Manmohan Singh (S.G.P.C. 1962), G.S. Talib (1984), Pritam Singh Chahil (1993), as well as others.

The proliferation in the last several decades of portable, personal computing devices, from personal computers, to tablets, to smart phones, has created a new technological apparatus through which to communicate and share information. With regards to the Sikh interpretive traditions, this new technology has been employed primarily to transfer texts into digital formats that can then be accessed on these personal devices. Since the 1990s numerous websites have appeared that feature SGGS and other canonical texts such as the *Dasam Granth* and *Sūraj Prakāsh*, as well as reference works such as *Mahān Kōsh* in online, searchable formats. The program Sikhi-to-the-Max, which allows for the simulcasting of the texts of shabads and their translations on a video screen for the *sangat* to view as *kīrtan* is being performed, has become a ubiquitous part of *diwan* programs in gurdwaras, particularly in diaspora settings. These websites and programs rely however on previous works of interpretation and reference rather than facilitating or producing new creative forms.

The development of new audiovisual technologies, from audio cassette and VHS tapes, to digital formats such as the CD, VCD, and DVD, and more recently digital streaming, however has created a novel phenomenon after a long century that was dominated by print forms, the resurgence of oral exegesis. Giani Sant Singh "Maskeen" (1934–2005) is an exemplary figure in this regard. Maskeen was trained in the Nirmala tradition but also had attained a mastery of languages, including Gurbani, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, that resembled that of the exegetes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His depth of knowledge and effective delivery made him a highly sought after *kathakār*, and he traveled frequently to perform katha, especially to diasporic locations in places such as the US, the UK, and Canada. Many, if not most, of his lectures were recorded by devotees and

later transferred to various audiovisual formats that were then widely distributed. Many of his lectures were also transcribed and continue to be published in book form. Through the means of these contemporary technologies, he was thus able to transmit his oral exegesis to a much wider audience than would have been possible in earlier times. Maskeen was not alone in these endeavors; many others have also followed in his footsteps, and today the recording, streaming, and digital distribution of oral katha remains popular. The new audiovisual technologies then, as print did a century before, have again altered the possibilities for Sikh interpretive traditions, in this case, reviving the tradition of oral exegesis and the mode of thought that it embodies, which had been subordinated to print forms for most of the twentieth century.

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THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SECULAR

Sikh Engagements With Modern Punjabi Literature

Anne Murphy

Introduction

Sikh authors have played a defining role in the formation of modern Punjabi literature in late colonial and post-Partition India. While conventional wisdom often suggests that non-Sikhs did not engage in Punjabi language textual production, that is not the case – this is well demonstrated in Farina Mir’s important 2010 monograph on Punjabi print culture in colonial Punjab, and Julien Columbeau’s (2019, 2021) innovative work on the Punjabi movement in Pakistan in the early decades after Independence. Indeed, as Columbeau (2019: 46) shows, the Christian author Joshua Fazluddin had been active in publishing with the Shahmukhi Punjabi language journal *Punjabi Darbar* from 1928 to 1935 and published his modern Punjabi novel *Prabhā* in Shahmukhi in 1945. Punjabi literature in the late colonial period was thus the locus of activity for a diverse array of Punjabis, writing in both the Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi scripts. Sikhs played a foundational role within this broader context, engaging with Punjabi language literary and textual production in diverse terms.

As I have argued elsewhere (Murphy 2018), modern Punjabi as a language served as the vehicle for literary production in three modes. Firstly, in the creative reproduction of existing literary forms, such as the *qissā*, which found new voice in the print environment of the Raj, as Mir (2010) shows, alongside the *bara mah* and other traditional forms, which Francesca Orsini (2009) has explored in Hindi/Urdu linguistic domains. Secondly, modern Punjabi literature was used for the expression of different kinds of utilitarian discourses, which included both religiously marked discourses of debate and reform, and, in alliance with these, historical inquiry and theology, as well as scientific discourses such as astrology or medicine (overtly political work in the colonial period was of course in danger of censorship, so political themes were somewhat clandestine in form). In this category we can include a range of Punjabi-language translations and commentaries, such as on the Qur’an and the Diwaan of Haafiz, and Punjabi/Persian and Punjabi/Arabic dictionaries.¹ If we see this category more broadly, as utilitarian and political as well, we might then also include the work associated with the *Ghadar* (“revolution”) movement, which emerged in 1913 on the West Coast of Canada and the United States, with its didactic, utilitarian, and political commitments (K. Singh ed. 1995). The progressive interests of that body of literature link it to modern Punjabi literary work that emerged later – the last of my three categories – but in form and style it exhibits closer ties with these first two.

Thirdly, modern Punjabi was the vehicle for modern literary creation meant to rework tradition and self-consciously utilize new forms, where Gurmukhi Punjabi dominated and for the most part Urdu supplanted Shahmukhi Punjabi, particularly for narrative forms like the short story and novel, although these new forms were also linked to already existing narrative forms, with a “plural heritage,” in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee (2006: 596). It would also be a mistake, however, to see these three categories and the diverse works of the first half of the twentieth century that fall within them (in both scripts), as absolutely distinct; they often co-mingled and were presented in tandem, as Francesca Orsini (2002: 31) has described for Hindi-language work of the same period. Punjabi language production (and the journals and tracts that were the primary vehicle for it) exhibited parallel diversity of type and content. We often also see different kinds of material produced by the same authors: Punjabi authors who produced religiously marked discourses of debate and reform might also produce works of historical inquiry or utilitarian work; some of the same persons also wrote *qisse*, which Mir sees as fundamental to the “Punjabi literary formation.” That formation, however, was not sealed off from the more agonistic literatures of reform and identity-construction. Diversity of type of literature in both Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi, with strong parallels among work in both scripts, was thus far more normal than perhaps is apparent to us now and reflected a diversity of authors and identities, within which, Sikhs were prominent.

This chapter seeks to consider creative literary work in Punjabi by Sikh authors in the period of decolonization and after as a domain for the investigation of the lived possibility of the secular. As Craig Calhoun et al. (2011: 5) have noted, “Secularism should be seen as a presence . . . [it] is, rather than merely the absence of religion, something we need to think through.” The secular, then, is not only a set of political structures or even goals, but in the words of Charles Taylor, “is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place” (2007: 3). It is central to understanding modern literary and cultural production in South Asia. As Rustom Bharucha (1998: 9) has so rightly shown, the “lived secular” is what he calls the lived experience of “social togetherness,” the “unnamed, fragmented, diffused, and unformulated as the ‘secular.’” This is the secular that lies at the center of the interests of this paper, building on the appreciation of the role of the imagination that, as Arjun Appadurai famously described it, “is today a staging ground for action, not only for escape” (1996: 7). This chapter thus seeks to consider the social worlds constructed by modern Punjabi literature in the decades right before and after independence/Partition (with a focus on Indian Punjabi literary work), and the ways in which it provided a locus for exploration of the possibility of the secular in terms occluded in the realm of conventional politics. The literary, it is argued, gestures towards and embraces the diffused, lived secular that Bharucha invokes. There is something at stake in modern Punjabi literature and its imagination of the secular and the progressive that is both larger and more political than the literary but is also essentially about the imaginative and the creative. If we were to extend on the insights of Sheldon Pollock (2006: 14, 18, 76, 132–134) on the pre-modern period, where he explores the “aestheticization of power,” it is in the aesthetic and creative life of a language and its literary life that we can fully understand its relationship to power, not only in the stated aims of a political program or set of state policies or structures. My effort here is therefore in some ways allied to the work of Priya Kumar (2008: xv), which also foregrounds the creative and the literary in an “ethics of coexistence,” as she calls it, “as a deeply felt imaginative response to particular historical moments marked by rising religious violence in the Indian subcontinent literary . . . [that] can make a significant contribution to . . . the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious groups in the Indian subcontinent.” Here, I seek to understand the secular and its implications, in relation to both literary practice and Sikh communitarian identity. It is argued that to imagine the secular as it has been, and what it might be, may be best

understood as a fundamentally *creative* act and one that is foundational to Sikh engagements with modern Punjabi literature and with the world.

The Emergence of Modern Punjabi Literature

Farina Mir's valuable 2010 monograph has given us a clear view of the extent and shape of Punjabi-language publishing in the colonial period, when Punjabi language periodicals of diverse kinds flourished, despite a relative lack of support by the state. This was the location of the development of modern Punjabi literary practice: within the ephemeral and periodic publications of the new print industry of colonial Punjab. We cannot underestimate the role of such publications in the development of modern Punjabi literature: *Sundari*, Bhai Vir Singh's famed 1898 novel – seen to be the first modern Punjabi novel – was first published in serialized form, as was his poetry, retellings of the lives of the Gurus *Srī Gurū Nānak Chamatkār* and *Srī Gurū Kalgīdhar Chamatkār*, his play *Rājā Lakhdātā Singh*, and the narrative poem *Rānā Sūrat Singh* (Malhotra and Murphy 2020; Murphy 2023; Ga. Singh 1973: 27; Gurcharan Singh 1973: 140; H. Singh 1972: 33; Vig 2020). Bhai Vir Singh co-founded the Wazir-i-Hind Press in Amritsar in 1891, a monthly journal *Nirgunīārā* in 1893 – which was the vehicle for his own religious as well as creative works, as well as works by others, such as the modernist mystical poet Puran Singh (Ga. Singh 1973: 27) – and the Khalsa Tract Society in 1894; according to Harbans Singh, Vir Singh authored approximately 90% of the works in the latter, all published anonymously (1972: 32). He began the weekly newspaper *Khalsa Samachar* in 1899.

While the self-consciously literary journal genre, as it emerged in the closing decades of the colonial period, was focused in its orientation and content, it too featured diverse content. We can see this in the path-breaking journal *Prīt Laṛī*, or *Chain of Love*, which was founded by Gurbakhsh Singh in 1933 and was published in Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script and, at different times, also in English and Urdu (Murphy Forthcoming A). Gurbakhsh Singh – who is known even today by the epithet *Prīt Laṛī* in honor of his founding of this influential journal – was an author, journalist, and editor, who was born in Sialkot in present-day Pakistan in 1895, in an Ahluwalia Sikh family (Kohli 1989). He is also the founder in 1938 of Preet Nagar (literally, the “city of love”), an intentional arts community founded as a writer's collective and refuge. Some of the most well-known literary and artistic figures of late colonial and early postcolonial Punjab were associated with it: the novelist Nanak Singh, theatrical visionary Balwant Gargi, Amrita Pritam, film actor Balraj Sahni, and others were said to be a part of the “Preet Saina,” or army of love. His founding of Preet Nagar reflected his commitment to social change and communal living, and the social reconstruction of society. *Prīt Laṛī*, too, was driven by these commitments (Murphy Forthcoming A).

Gurbakhsh Singh himself, as an author, is well-known for his two novels, nonfiction pieces, short stories, and drama, including one full-length and several one-act plays. He is said to have published 50 books, although a full and accurate accounting is difficult to obtain, since many of his works are collections of material from the journal *Prīt Laṛī*, edited and collected in different forms. He was originally trained as an engineer and pursued advanced study in the United States – where he began writing, in English – before returning to India to take up his career, and later, to begin his career as a writer and editor. His early work was influenced by the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and others. In time, he also came to be strongly influenced by Left and anticolonial thought and politics. His perhaps most well-known but also controversial novel was *Anviāhī Māh*, or “Unwed Mother” (first published in *Prīt Laṛī* in 1938 and later independently in 1942), which portrayed the trials of a woman who falls for a young man wrongly condemned to death, and suffers the consequences of their brief encounter in a society that condemns easily a woman in such a

position but at the same time leaves her open to abuse by men. The concern that Singh expresses in this novel and other works regarding the status of women and their plight in a patriarchal society was indicative of a broader interest among Punjabi authors in understanding and critiquing gendered social relationships in different contexts, as Parvinder Dhariwal 2013 has explored. Such an interest did not demonstrably lead, however, to the involvement of equal numbers of women in literary work and authorship (Murphy Forthcoming B). In such works, he also valorizes an idealized love that moved beyond boundaries and social constraints; this came to represent a hallmark of his work and philosophy, across his work. Kartar Singh Duggal and Sañt Singh Sekhon have argued that what Gurbakhsh Singh was most renowned for was his “non-religious, secular thinking and polite, refined tone and manner” (1992: 365), which are most fully represented in his wide-ranging nonfiction essays and notes in his magazine, in a biographical or autobiographical mode, on human values and qualities, criticism, or on contemporary times; we will see this in the work explored later. Singh also published nine collections of short stories and was an early leader in that genre and described his vision of an ideal world in several works, such as *Changerī Duniyā* (1947) and *Navīn Takri Duniyā* (1950). He was in this typical of Progressive writers across languages, who sought to engage with the world, to change it. Yet lest we see Gurbakhsh Singh as entirely different from Bhai Vir Singh, we can see strong parallels in the way each developed the periodical form as a vehicle for their own writings. It needs also be noted that Bhai Vir Singh himself was a modernist poet and that is what he is generally known for in literary circles; this is a generally neglected feature of his work in the English-language scholarship (Murphy 2023). And for both Gurbakhsh Singh and for Bhai Vir Singh, genre offered no limitation: both wrote in widely divergent forms. Finally, both figures were both editors and proprietors of the printing facility itself: both self-produced their work, their journals. This gave both significant control over message and ability to bring their voice to the public through their publications. We can see clear continuity, therefore, between these two figures, as different as their political and communitarian orientations were.

A look at some of *Prīt Larī*’s early issues provides a sense of the ethos of the magazine and demonstrates some of the diversity that Orsini (2002) describes for Hindi magazines of the late colonial period. We see a range of short pieces in the table of contents from the March 1936 issue – the first piece in the table of contents describes the movement of the journal’s printing facilities to Lahore: the magazine was overall highly self-reflexive, talking about itself. There are explicitly nationalist pieces, such as an article on Satyagraha and Hunger Strikes. Another article discusses Shantiniketan, the educational and arts center of the Tagore family, and another, omens and superstitions. The third item in the list of contents, *Rozānā Zindagi dī Sikhiyā*, “Lessons in Daily Life,” became the title for an independent book published from Preet Nagar in 1938. The book featured “notes,” as they were called, that had been published in Preet Lari over the prior four years (Jaggi ed. 1996: 22). The introduction to the book noted that

Zindagī mainūn sabh toñ kāmal guru bhāsi hai, te nihāit sabar te vafādārī nāl main uh sabh kujh vekhnā chāhundā hāñ, jo mainūn ih vikhā sakdī hai. Life appears to me to be the most perfect/expert Guru, and I want to see everything that it shows me, with great patience and faithfulness.

(Ibid.)

We can see in the December 1938 issue the range of materials present in the magazine. On page 1209, there is an anecdote related about a woman who cleans the graves in a graveyard, to bring peace to those who will rise on judgement day. On page 1170 there is a description of a conference of artists and like-minded thinkers: the *Prīt Milnī* or love meeting. A song is shared elsewhere; there

is a description of the “Army of Love” – the Preet Saina – which represented the core of the Preet Nagar community. Most pieces are descriptive nonfiction and critical reflection – this is a striking feature of *Pīṭ Lārī*, a substantive aspect of its style. At the same time, in the same issue, we see one part of *Anviāhi Mā*, *Unwed Mother*, Gurbakhsh Singh’s novel mentioned earlier, in its serialized form. Indeed, we can see across issues that love was a central theme, repeated throughout the issues in the early period (Jaggi ed. 1996: 53 ff.). We see this, for instance, in the short essay titled *Piār*, or “Love,” which was published in book form in *Sāvīṇ paddharī zīndagī*, roughly, *An even, levelled life*, in 1943 and was published in the magazine in 1937 (Jaggi ed. 1996: 110–118; on the book as a whole, see 24–25). There he tells us,

Piār zīndagī dī ik sarab-viāpak sachiāi hai, jihaṛī kise na kise umar vich harek istrī purash de dil dā gujjhā jān ugharīā supanā huṇḍī hai Love is an all-pervasive truth, which is either the secret or explicit dream of every man and woman at some point in their lives.

(Jaggi ed. 1996: 110)

He goes on in recognition of the limitations on this dream, that with every pervasive truth there are all-pervasive falsehoods and misunderstandings that prevail. He says that in life, one’s first emotion is self-preservation or protection, and next is love, and “God has joined love to creation” (Ibid.). It is fundamental. Yet the lust for material things in our society has made people abandon love, and “in this situation, losing hope at the inevitable terrible results of this, love has been allowed to creep down on the slope of evil” (Ibid.) Such anecdotes and commentaries dominate in the magazine, and love is the basis for truthful, full engagement with the world. With this, Gurbakhsh Singh argued for a radical kind of connectivity, enacted through his notes about the lived, every day.

Complexities of the Secular: A Literary Perspective in Urgent Times

Gurbakhsh Singh’s vision is reflective of a hopeful moment, when the promise of decolonization seemed to herald a new time and a new set of possibilities. It shared this sense of promise with the progressive literary movement more broadly. Such a vision was fundamentally challenged by the terrible violence that tore apart Punjab at Partition, which left Preet Nagar as an isolated village near the contested border between India and Pakistan. But it was the trials of postcolonial politics, and the Emergency of 1975–1977, that perhaps truly marked the demise of this spirit of hope in postcolonial India. Gyan Prakash (2019: 39) argues convincingly for reconnecting The Emergency – Indira Gandhi’s abrogation of democratic processes and civil liberties and protections and routing of any person who might represent a form of opposition (with many bystanders among them) – to the politics of its time, “with roots in the past and implications for the future”; at the same time, it was in itself a “turning point in the history of Indian democracy.” This is when the “gap between . . . the promise of postcolonial freedom and its failed realization” became too great (Prakash 2019: 110–111). The trials of the Indian Punjab are grounded in and extend out of this period, when the Akali Dal, the prominent party of Punjab that has positioned itself as reflecting “panthic,” or Sikh community, interests, joined the diverse constellation of parties and groups from across the country that challenged Gandhi’s overextension of power. The search for greater autonomy for Punjab escalated out of this fundamental assault on democratic practice. Gandhi’s return to power in 1980, and continuing interference in Punjabi state politics in the years that followed, led to what has been termed the “Punjab crisis,” as the federal government’s quest for absolute control brought about increasing conflict in the state. The scale of crisis for Sikhs across the political spectrum in this time cannot be overstated.

This provides the context for our reading of the work of Kartar Singh Duggal, one of the foremost of modern Punjabi language authors: a leading short story writer and novelist in the first generation of writers in the years leading up to partition/independence and in the early decades of the postcolonial period, with roots in the Rawalpindi area of the now Pakistani Punjab. Known for his realist fiction, and his attention to the experience of the marginalized and dispossessed, he was also a devout Sikh (R. Singh Forthcoming). The work he published in the period of conflict in Punjab is indicative of his passionate engagement with his world and the complexity of his understanding of it. Among works of this period, for example, he produced a trilogy of works, *Nānak Nām Charhdī Kalā* (1989, *Blessed Are Those Who Remember God*), *Tere Bhāṇe* (1991, *As Willed by You*), and *Sarbat dā Bhalā* (1992, *The Welfare of All*) (Ibid.). These works took as their scope a comprehensive view of Sikh history. The vision of community and belonging in these works is complex and does not adhere to simplistic formulations of “insider” and “outsider,” “progressive” and “conservative” (Murphy 2021). This is characteristic of Duggal’s work, and his position as a writer in the Punjabi language, on the pressing issues that faced Indian Punjabis and the Sikh community in the 1980s and 1990s. Duggal’s meditation in English on the Punjab crisis, published in the same period, in 1992, provides a sense of progressive writers’ dilemma in the wake of the complex conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s in Punjab and beyond in India. He opens with broad recognition that “the Punjab, a Sikh majority State, has been discriminated against” (Duggal 1992: 11). He names, among a range of issues, the violation of “the sanctity of the Golden Temple” and the killing of Sikhs after Indira Gandhi’s assassination.

He follows this with a challenge: “But is it being a true Sikh of Guru Nanak taking to indiscriminate slaughter of innocent men, women and children?” (Murphy 2018). This sets the tenor of Duggal’s work, where we see real recognition of grievances and problems – he notes that “every true Punjabi nurses a grievance against the Government” and that the “responsibility for it can be squarely laid at the door of the politicians both at the Centre and in the State, more the Centre” – but at the same time, he is critical of the violence of separatists (Duggal 1992: 119, 12; see also 31). He connects the violence in Punjab with violence elsewhere in India – UP, Kashmir, Telangana, etc. – but instead of utilizing this as a reason to disavow what has happened in Punjab (a tactic visible in the work of those who justified state violence, such as Satpal Dang, see Murphy 2018), Duggal (1992: 32) argues that in total this violence speaks “of a deep malady with which our body politic seems to be afflicted.” For Duggal, as for many others, it is the further division of Punjab that he seeks to prevent: “The fact remains that Punjabi is the mother tongue of the entire Punjab. But in all the political machinations – first partition then the carving out of the Punjabi Suba – the worst sufferer was the Punjabi language.” He then quotes a poem of prominent poet Surjit Patar: “It was Waris who was lost to us yesterday/Is it Shiv Kumar’s turn now?” (Duggal 1992: 58). Patar refers here to Waris Shah, the eighteenth-century author of the great Punjabi narrative *Hir-Ranjha*, and one of modern Punjabi’s great post-Partition poets (and a Muslim), and Hindu poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi, who wrote the beloved *Lūnā*, a verse play based on the *qissā* (narrative) *Puran Bhagat*. Batalvi’s Hindu identity would leave him outside a Sikh-defined Punjab. Opposition to separatism is here *not* grounded in support for the Indian state.

Readings of three stories from a collection of short stories published in this period, titled *Painṅhe Vain Dūṅhe* “The Deep Dirge Will Sound” (Duggal 1993; R. Singh forthcoming), provide a vivid sense of the complexity of Duggal’s position vis-a-vis violence and the grievances that undergird it. The well-known story from this collection “*Ik militant dā janam*” or “The Birth of a Militant,” for example, provides an unflinching portrayal of class and caste relationships in Punjab’s countryside (Duggal 1999: 1–5). The story opens with a description of Mangu, the son of Paleṭhī (*Maṅgū Paleṭhī dā Puttar sī*; Duggal 1993: 15). It is significant, this identification of the son with his mother,

as we learn at the end of the story. Mangu's family is identified as being *chamār* by caste but as having abandoned the occupation associated with that caste (leather work) to take up agriculture. This is very important to Mangu's father, Mārū Rām: "*Chamār toṅ khetīhar hoṇā, jiveṅ kise dī jūn badal gāṭ hove*. To go from Chamar to farmer, it was as if one's very existence had changed" (Ibid.). However, to Maru Ram's horror, his son Mangu seems to like to call himself Chamar. To Maru Ram, this betrays all that they have achieved. He believes Mangu might become a real landlord someday, given the opportunities that exist for members of their caste: "*Āpṇī sarkār ūch-nūch, zāt-pāt de sāre bhed miṭāṇ vālī sī*. Their government was poised to abolish all discrimination based on low and high, and on caste" (Ibid.: 16). Mangu is described as being smart and successful and doing well in school, so well that he might make an officer someday (Ibid.). But to Maru Ram's horror, Mangu instead criticizes the government and accuses it of perpetuating poverty and inequity. Mangu denies that the government is doing anything for their kind: "*ih sabh kāgāzī kārvātāṅ ne* That is all just on paper!" (Ibid.) For Mangu, "the winds had changed" (Ibid.: 17). It is time for the majority to rule, and they – the landless, who work the land – are the majority.

Then Maru Ram is advised that he should get his son married. "*Viāh karke muṇḍā kābū vich hovegā*. After getting married, the boy will be under control" (Ibid.: 17). The wedding proceeds with great fanfare. The bride is beautiful beyond compare, like a jewel (Ibid.: 18). The groom remains celebrating with his friends until late, drinking heavily. And then he proceeds to his room to find his wife. When he does not find her, he asks his mother, who tells him she has gone to the landlord. His father appears, to explain "*puttar, ihī rivāj e. pio dāde toṅ turiā āndā e*. Son, this is the tradition. It has been going on for generations" (Ibid.: 19): the first night for all brides must be spent with the landlord. And then Mangu realizes, "So, it is true, what people used to say to Mangu from time to time. The landlord's workers! (*bisvedār de khetīhar!*)" (Ibid.).

With this, it appears to Mangu as if a bomb has gone off. And then he retrieves a weapon he had hidden and leaves the house. Then, "*itne din ho gae Mangu dī koī so bo nahīn sī*. So many days passed with no word from Mangu." Soon, he has a price on his head and is wanted, dead or alive. In this concise and tightly configured story, Duggal addresses the cruelty of caste oppression, the limited scope for opposing it, and the rise of militancy as a desperate response.

"Punjab Singh," from the same volume, provides a similarly striking portrait of insurrection and violence, also from the position of the home.² Here, we meet Chando, who finds herself surrounded by gossiping neighbors: "*jitne mūṅh utnīāṅ gallāṅ* As many words as there were mouths" (Duggal: 20). The narration continues with Chando's reflection on her husband, Pañjū, who is described as a "real pearl" (Ibid.: 20). He prays regularly, and she finds him praying in the middle of the night, in his "honey-sweet voice *mākhiyūṅ mithī sur vic*" (Ibid.: 20). At the same time, she wonders where he goes. At times, she waits all night for him to return. At the same time, in all directions, there is trouble. Whether the bullet comes from the gun of a rebel, or from the soldiers' searches, "*marde tāṅ rabb de baṅde hī ne*. God's own people are killed, either way" (Ibid.: 20). And here is where Duggal asserts his position, describing all those killed, regardless of identity, as "Someone's husband, the apple of someone's eye, someone's brother" (Ibid.). The humanity of those who have been killed is foregrounded, their connections to others, and their equality in the grief that their loss brings.

Chando feels completely alone, because her husband's parents are both dead, and he has no siblings. This is why the censure of the neighbors is so painful: "Panju has fallen into bad company – anyone who opened their mouths about it, would say things like this" (Ibid.: 21). Yet Chando could see no fault in her husband. Many of the other husbands abandoned farming and drank and had fun: but not her Panju. He maintained the old traditions (*maryādā*) of his forefathers (Ibid.). Chando longs for a child, like other young brides have – and she thinks of the things in her dowry that were meant for that time in her life, lying still unused.

With this in mind, she enters the room that holds these items, stored away, and what does she find behind the chest? Weapons of all different kinds: bullets, hand grenades, pistols (Ibid.: 22). She wonders for a moment who could have brought these items into her house, and then realizes: “*Āṇḍhī-guāṇḍhī khabare sacche san*. Who knows, but the neighbors were right!” (Ibid.). She begins to think of all the violence that had taken place: when eight people were murdered on a bus, for example. Her husband wasn’t home at that time. When he did come home, she happened to mention it to him, and he acted as if he hadn’t heard, and “No word of sympathy came from his mouth” (Ibid.). And then she thinks of all her friends who have become widows: Tāpo, Baṅtī, Guḍḍī, Rādhā, Rukmaṇī, and the “ruined villages, desolate lanes, and scorched courtyards” (Ibid.).

Chando falls asleep, and when she wakes, her husband has returned. He begins to pray and she to cook breakfast for him. She resolves that she will ask about the weapons when he is done praying. She is still engaged with cooking when he finishes, and he calls out to her that he will move the tractor, because he had left it in the middle of the courtyard in haste the day before. The sound of the tractor’s motor startles a hen and her chicks, and one of them comes under the tractor’s wheel. Hearing the birds, Panju jumps down from the driver’s seat, and he takes the dead chick in his lap, “his overflowing tears flowing from his lashes . . . as if a great crime had been committed” (Ibid.: 23). Chando tries to console him – it was only a chick and would have been butchered to be eaten soon enough. But Panju is inconsolable, and he refuses to eat. This of course means that she too cannot eat: “If the man of the house hasn’t eaten, how could a woman eat?” (Ibid.). At that moment, as Panju looks at the chick, a jeep stops outside their door. An officer says, “This is Panju – Panjab Singh” (Ibid.), and with this, he is put in handcuffs.

One last story from this collection, “*ik hor milīṭaiṇṭ dā janam*” – the birth of one more militant – brings yet another perspective on the terrible violence in Punjab. The story begins with the statement that “some fault was his own, but mostly it was his parents” (Ibid.: 86). There were five sons, and the parents divided their property among them. How could each provide for a family on the land allocated to him? The worst off among the five is the youngest, Niāmat. He is also the most educated, and he has married an urban Khatri woman: “No one had ever heard or seen of a woman like her. From village to village, street to street, and house to house, people started to talk about her” (Ibid.). She did not want to become a mother until her husband got a job – she argues that if their small plot wasn’t enough to feed them, how could they feed one more? Finally, pressured by his wife, Niāmat looks for work and finally agrees to go to Delhi, mostly because of the state of things in Punjab: “Night and day there was the sound of gunshots. the police tightening their screws and picking people up, and on the other hand, the militants wouldn’t let anyone catch their breath” (Ibid.: 87). His wife spends her time watching TV or listening to the radio and chatting with friends.

There is no word from Niāmat after his arrival in Delhi. That was the day of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, after which “*jīveh tarṭhallī mach gāi* It was as if there was an uproar” (Ibid.). Ambo, his wife, assumes he had taken shelter at one of the large gurdwaras in Delhi, such as Rakabganj. As she waits for him, the police come to the village, asking to interview all young men. Niāmat fits the description of a potential militant – young, Sikh, and not at home. His wife seems relatively content at home, and this is seen as a further indictment (Ibid.: 88). Ambo dreams one night that her husband is returning, so she rises in the morning and begins to prepare for his arrival, cooking his favorite foods. He does not come for the whole day, but she sits outside, waiting for him.

Then the police arrive, and the senior officer is drunk. Ambo tells him calmly that her husband is not home, and so they must return to speak with him. The officer looks at her, dressed for her husband’s return, and says that her husband will never return: “In the Delhi pogroms after the murder of Indira Gandhi he had a tire doused in kerosene placed around his neck, as had happened

to thousands of other Sikh youths, and had been done away with” (Ibid.: 89). She slaps him and somehow forces him outside the gate. The next day, a police jeep comes to the house, and they lead Ambo away in handcuffs. Days pass and the village is tense. The police say that Niāmat is one of the terrorists and that Ambo must know where he is.

Ambo is delivered to a police unit in a deserted place outside the city and is kept for days. She is tortured. Niāmat still does not return. Soon, everyone believes that he was a militant: his relatives, neighbors, and friends. After all, so many young men had become involved in the movement. It must all be true. Meanwhile, three days pass, and Ambo is not allowed to close her eyes. She is given electric shocks. She is punched, slapped, and kicked. Why wouldn’t she tell them where he was? The worst is when they use the *velnā*-like device, as is used to crush sugar cane. She feels as if her bones would break, and she screams in agony. One evening, as the officers drink, one who was a bit drunker than the rest says, with a “dangerous look” on his face, that it has been more than a year since they left their villages: maybe the time had come. All of them become silent, but none objects to the idea. A female officer hears this from the next room and makes a decision: she brings food to Ambo and tells her that she will leave the door ajar. This is Ambo’s chance to go, and the female officer will face what would happen.

Ambo escapes and, with that, Duggal tells us, “*us rāt ik hor ātaṅkvāḍī dā janam hoiā sī*. One more terrorist was born that night” (Ibid.: 90).

With these three stories, Duggal paints a portrait of violence in Punjab, an accounting of violence in all of its forms. Duggal is critical of Sikh separatist violence in “Punjab Singh” and acknowledges its impact across Punjabi communities but also portrays with sympathy those driven to militancy, in the case of both lower-class/lower-caste actors and those persecuted for being Sikh. He addresses directly the injustices that undergird militancy, with sympathy, underscoring the violence that begets the turn to violence. But he challenges the violence committed in the name of militancy at the same time.

A Sikh Secular

In 1982, a decade before the stories and other work mentioned in the previous section, Kartar Singh Duggal published a work in English titled *Secular Perceptions in Sikh Faith*, which was in part previously serialized in *The Tribune*. “From the response received,” Duggal tells us in the preface of the book, “it can claim in a modest sense to have made its contribution to making the Punjabi intelligentsia aware of the issues at stake” (1982: 12). He continues to name what is at stake: that which is “the negation of what the Khalsa was created for and the values the adherents of the great Sikh Gurus have upheld in the annals of history” (Ibid.). The volume was written “to catch up with the mounting tension in the Punjabi starting actually with the Akalis’ clash with the Nirankaris at Amritsar and then the trouble spreading to embroil the entire State and inevitably taking a communal shape in the familiar old pattern” (Ibid.). Duggal sought to intervene, then, in the then mounting conflict in Punjab. His tactic in doing so was to embrace the secular underpinnings of Sikh faith, through a historical account of the Sikh tradition that is typical of the ways in which historical representation itself has been utilized to produce Sikh communitarian formations, here to argue for the fundamentally non-communal nature of Sikh tradition (Murphy 2012). He provides the example of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who was “truly secular,” which Duggal defines as “religious neutralism on the part of the State that decides issues on merit, irrespective of considerations of caste, creed or colour” (Ibid.: 62). Duggal employs a clear definition of the secular here but also construes it as historically constituted and specific: “Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s secularism was of the eighteenth-century type,” he notes, “it was conceived in a spirit of compromise and enlightened self-interest” (Ibid.: 70).

The secular is articulated here – as is his formulation of *Pañjābīat* in his 1996 volume by that name – through Sikh history. This grounds the secular within the unfolding of Sikh tradition itself. We can see this position as akin to those of other critics of the secular, such as Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan, but Duggal does not reject the secular in broad terms as a Western construct and as irrelevant (see Nandy and Madan in Bhargava ed. 1998). He seeks to own it fully, as a Sikh and *within Sikhism*. In the opening chapter of this volume, he tells us that “Punjabiness” appears before him in the form of an old woman:

ih pañjābaṇ aṇmaṛī us pañjāb dī talāsh kar rahī hai jis dā ih parchhāvān hai. us chaman di ihnūn bhāl hai jis dī uh khushbū hai. unhān dariāvān nūn ih labhdī hai jinhān de kaṇḍhe khed khed ke, ih parvān chaṛhī. This Punjabi mother searches for that Punjab that reflects her. She searches for that garden that has its fragrance. She searches for those rivers, on the banks of which she matured.

(Duggal 1996: 9)

(In another essay in the same volume, “*Pañjābīat nān hai sahihoṇḍ dā* The Name of Punjabi is co-existence,” he describes Punjabi as a fragrance.) (Ibid.: 68). His further discussion frames Punjabi around history – the Indus Valley civilization, the Vedic period, up to the modern period and the central role Punjabis played in independence.³ He highlights the bravery of Punjabis in facing down invaders: “Punjab made itself into a shield to protect the nation” (Ibid.: 11). Then he relates the history of the Gurus and relates this to fundamental conditions of Punjabi: “*Pañjābīat nān hai mel milāp dā, jīn dā te jīn deṇ dā, sāñjīvāltā dā, vañḍ chhakaṇ dā*. The name of Punjabi is one of meetings, of living and letting others live, of cooperation, of sharing” (Ibid.). In the end of the essay, he advocates for the rejoining of the whole of the Indian Punjab, prior to the 1966 division of the state and formation of the states of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. That division, he says, “was a betrayal of Punjabi” (Ibid.: 22). This, in the end, matches his description of Punjab at the beginning of the essay, where he says that Punjab reached Kashmir and Kabul, to Ladakh and Sindh (Ibid.: 9). The Punjab of his imagination is embodied in the rule of Ranjit Singh in 1839.

In the Punjab conflict, Duggal tells us, Punjabi writers are caught in between: destined “to watch and suffer” (Duggal 1992: 17). We can see Punjabi literature thus operating as a challenge to the national – and to nationalizing interests – of all kinds, speaking to the enjoyment of a kind of secular that exceeds the workings of the state, moving against a view of the “secular” in “unequivocally statist terms,” as Rustom Bharucha (1999: 19) has sought to do. Creative writing in Punjabi in India, in these terms, cannot be subsumed within Sikh nationalist, Left, or state interests, but exists in complicated relation to each; Duggal’s work shows us this, so did Gurbakhsh Singh’s earlier capacious work. Indeed, our understanding of Sikh political interests in the Indian Punjab overall has been impoverished by lack of attention to the complexity of forces, which cannot be simply merged: religious identities and related concerns, caste, the Left, the state, and non-state nationalizing interests. Recognition of a multiplicity of political positions outside of existing binaries in the Indian context might suggest a new way of thinking through both Punjabi and Sikh political articulations, at intersection with the secular in diverse terms. (See discussion along these lines in Murphy 2018.)

Conclusions

The vibrant social and political imaginaries of modern Punjabi literature continue today, despite and perhaps because they so fully exceed the domain of conventional politics, which for many has been a realm of disappointment. The *Prīt Laṛī* journal and *Prīt Nagar* continue today: after Gurbakhsh

Singh's death, the journal was edited by his son Navtej Singh, and then after his death, by Poonam Singh, his widow, with the help of Navtej's younger brother, Rati Kant Singh – the two of whom later married. Preetnagar is relatively isolated but has remained active as a center for experimental theater (Dhaliwal 2012). The couple's two daughters have initiated an artists' residency at the site, and theater remains a focus of activity. So the legacy of the literary journal, and the site founded with it, continues (Mahn et al. 2020). Other literary journals have come and gone – *Phulwāī* was founded by Hira Singh Dard in 1924; *Pañj Dariā* edited by Mohan Singh founded in 1939; *Ārsī* edited by Amrita Pritam founded in 1958; she later was the founder and editor of *Nāgmañi*, established in 1966 (Dutt 2018; Sharma 2016). While *Nāgmañi* closed in 2002, and others too have waned, the literary journal has retained its vibrancy: *Hun*, launched in 2005 by Avtar Jandialvi and now edited by Sushil Dosanjh, is a major player (Sharma 2016). There is *Kāfla*, a relative newcomer; it too has diverse content, historical work on Punjabi literature: in its July 2021 edition, it included a feature on the poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi, biographical portraits, and more literary work. *Barah mah* in Pakistan, founded in 2019, represents a recent addition to the literary magazine genre in Punjabi, joining a longer tradition that Columeau (2019, 2021) describes. And then of course there is the wider Punjabi world: the journal *Watanoh Dūr* – “far from the homeland” – which was founded in 1973 in greater Vancouver and published until 1986. After the journal closed, it was revived under a new name: *Watan*, or “homeland,” which continued until 1995, and then was brought to life again in 2007 as an online magazine.⁴ The homeland came home to Canada and was fully enabled to do so by the Internet – that, and YouTube, SoundCloud, and Zoom represent new extensions of the literary journal's form, perhaps. This is a continuing and productive form, and through it we can see this literary program's continuing affinities with a politics of hope that transcends the domain of conventional politics.

Author Darshan Singh (2015), winner of the Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature in 2015 for his novel *Lotā*, has noted the strong affinities between Sikh and progressive, Leftist thought: in his view, this is why so many Sikhs have been attracted to the Left (D. Singh 2015; see also B. Singh 2008; D Singh 2008). Indeed, in the words of Gurharpal Singh in early work, “for almost forty years the communist movement constituted the avant-garde of the Sikh community” (1994: preface). Duggal argues that “the Sikhs' adherence to the Punjabi language is, perhaps, the most secular feature of their way of life” (Duggal 1982: 92). “This love for the mother-tongue,” he then argues, “is a chain which is going to bind us together, the Hindus, the Sikhs, and the Muslims of the Punjab” (Ibid.: 94). In this formulation, Punjabi language and literature are tied to a politics that yet requires full enunciation. I have argued elsewhere that modern Punjabi literature functions as a kind of cultural historical practice, documenting and engaging the past in relation to the needs of the present (Murphy 2015). It is formed through the linkage of the “lived secular” to the creative, to the expression of the realities as well as the aspirations of life in the fictive and the reflective. It is this enjoyment of the secular, perhaps, that Punjabi represents today – we can see this in Pakistan, too (Murphy 2018). But this is no less of a struggle. As Duggal says, in ending his essay on Punjabi as coexistence, “*Faislā saḍe te hai* – the decision up to us” (Duggal 1996: 71).

Notes

1 In the British Library Punjabi tract collection, see for example: 14162.i.9–1, 14519.ee.5, 14787.c.1 and PanjD81.

2 This is available in English translation in Duggal 2002, although this volume could not be obtained by the author. Another translation is available in Duggal 1999: 28–31 (translated by Duggal himself). All translations here are by the chapter's author.

- 3 He says that the Punjabis were the last to lay down their arms to the British – and the first to raise their heads to challenge them, naming the Namdhari movement. While true, this selective reading disregards the role Punjabis played in defeating the rebellion of 1857. (Duggal 1996: 12)
- 4 See <http://watanarchives.wordpress.com>.

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WORDS ACROSS BORDERS

Literature of the Sikh Diaspora

*Parvinder Mehta***Introduction**

Understanding the literary history of the Sikh diaspora also entails understanding the trajectory of the global migrations as Sikhs migrated (mostly) from the Sikh homeland, Punjab, to other parts of the world. The Sikh empire (1799–1849), which flourished under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, eventually declining after his death, and gradually annexed into British rule, reminds us of how a distinct community underwent dispersals. The historical ramifications of Punjab's control by the British and later its partition in 1947 reflect the pivotal historical moments as Sikhs under British rule faced migrations. Compared to the non-Sikh writers of the Indian diaspora, the oeuvre of creative literature in English by Sikh writers of the diaspora may seem limited but is growing as more Sikh writers have taken to writing. Although many Sikh writers have written in Punjabi, and other regional languages, literature in English by Sikh diaspora writers initially under-explored in the earlier part of the twentieth century has now gradually begun to evolve from the post-independence era to contemporary times. Following the pioneering works of the first-generation Sikh immigrants, the emerging field of Sikh diaspora writings holds more promise in the twenty-first century. More contributions by Sikh diaspora writers address the variegated anxieties of Sikhs in the struggle with tradition, modernity, nationalism, migration, and globalization. Rooted and framed by the series of historical moments that established Sikh communities outside India, whether it be through the British colonial empire or post-Indian-independence migrations, most literature of the Sikh diaspora has reflected an intrinsic desire to affirm Sikh identities and negotiate them within Western paradigms. Tracing the literary history of Sikh diasporic writings, this article reviews how the predominant tropes of diasporic existence entailing themes of estrangement, homelessness, as well as self-affirmation and belonging, frame relatable narratives of being and becoming from historical legacies. In these narratives – of dislocation, departures, and arrivals, as well as hyphenations – that attempt to bridge the generational and cultural gaps, Sikh writers have revealed complex nuances of diasporic experiences.

Sikh Diaspora and Historical Legacies

Sikhs as a distinct community under the guidance of the Sikh gurus emerged as they were formalized as the *Khalsas* in 1699. During this time, Sikh migrations were mostly within the domestic boundaries of the Sikh empire. The emergence of the Sikh diaspora is generally attributed to

British colonial rule following the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. The first wave of Sikh migration had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century with the influx of workers from Punjab into East Africa to work on railway construction. Also, under British rule, the recruitment of Sikh soldiers in the British Army to fight for the British Empire led to their dispersal to Africa, America, and even Australia. As Darshan Tatla maintains in *The Sikh Diaspora*, Sikh migration is a modern phenomenon, divided into two major phases: colonial migration and postcolonial migration. The growing influence of Punjab as an agrarian, economic resource, and the increased military recruitment of Punjabi Sikhs paved the way for pioneer Sikh migration. In the middle of the nineteenth-century British rule, utilizing the indentured labor system, enabled the influx of workers from Punjab into East Africa to work on railway construction. Notably, although Indian emigration to British colonies as part of indentured labor began much earlier in the eighteenth century, Punjabi Sikhs migrated much later after Punjab became part of the British Indian empire (Tatla). Also, many rural Sikhs went to Burma, Malaya, Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong through military/police postings or penal settlements. The army recruitment of Sikh soldiers to fight for the British Empire further led to their dispersal to Africa, America, and even Australia. Sikh migration to Europe came much later after the outbreak of the First and the Second World Wars, when Sikh soldiers fought in Belgium, France, Italy, Holland, and Greece (Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011: 3). The preferred recruitment of Sikhs in regiments of the British Indian Army led to the “Punjabization” of the Indian army leading to an increased number of battalions in Punjab (Kaur 2011: 133). With improved infrastructure through the building of railways, the irrigation system, and trade growth, Punjab served the imperial interests of the British. The Sikh diaspora is thus largely an effect of British colonialism.

The postcolonial Sikh migration to Europe came after liberal immigration policies were encouraged to overcome labor shortages. Migrants to British colonies in East Africa were forced to leave in 1972 after the backlash against Asians in Uganda. During the 1980s, the political turmoil in Punjab especially after 1984, further increased the number of political migrants who sought political asylum in the USA, UK, Canada, Europe, and other countries such as Italy and Finland. These migrations of Sikhs away from India help us understand the efforts of the pioneer Sikhs to establish their unique cultural as well as religious identity in Eurocentric nations. Thus, the literature of the Sikh diaspora reveals identity matters as the paramount concern, and the lived experiences are generally entailed within frameworks of history, violence, and memory.

It also reveals an interesting paradigm – Sikh writers of Indian origin have either catered to the universalist notions of representing Sikh ideals within the larger, hegemonic framework of mainstream thought or underscored narratives premised on exceptionalism and difference from mainstream thought. Understanding such bifurcation helps us adopt a more critical approach to the diverse modes of narrativity and creative representation. How have Sikh writers represented their identities, histories, and their continental journeys across different centuries? Within the Western imaginary, have Sikhs of the diaspora been able to produce a literary canon worthy of representation, or are writings of the Sikh diaspora merely extended narratives of Indian history and ethos? How does the Sikh difference operate in narratives of dislocation from a native home and culture to the relocation to a new home and culture? Does the literature of the Sikh diaspora offer a viable critical lens to examine Sikh identities in terms of hyphenation and/or alienation or do writers of the Sikh diaspora frame an innate desire for acceptance and belonging, seeking to overcome the native trauma and/or enforced displacements? Examining such questions enables exploring how Sikh writers have engaged with ideological as well as emotional identifications and engendered transnational reciprocities with the host nation as well as located their self-ascription via cultural translation of Sikh identities.

Be it revisiting the ancestral roots in Punjab, reminiscing about the life experiences in pre-independent India, remembering the histories of mass displacements during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the exodus caused after the anti-Sikh violence in 1984, the ongoing migrations in pursuit of better living, or the contemporary challenges in affirming Sikh identities or even questioning the Sikh ethos, some common themes across the literary expressions include desiring self-affirmations in new homelands, dealing with new social formations from experiences of displacement, as well as creating a collective consciousness for Sikhs.

A large corpus of such literature relegates Sikh concerns either in terms of conflicts of belonging, investigating Eurocentric models of consciousness vis-à-vis the ethnic subjectivities portrayed or revealing intra-diaspora solidarities and conflicts. Thus, for instance, the narratives about the early generations of migrants who were challenged by their limited skills for linguistic/cultural communication may contrast widely with narratives of gradually established communities whose acculturation to the host country reveals a more integrated approach to collective identity-formation. The historical implications of the colonialist legacy, the major world wars, the struggle for Indian independence, the Partition of India and Pakistan as well as the post-independence attempts of self-determinism, including the Singh Sabha Movement and the political issues related to Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s describe a turbulent history of the Sikh community within the borders of the Indian nation-state. Several writings by Sikh diaspora writers in the twentieth and twenty-first century, therefore, choose to address these historical watershed moments that have shaped the Sikh ethos in host countries.

Sikh Pioneers and Arrival in the Twentieth Century

In earlier decades of the Sikh migration to the USA, several historical archives mention the emergence of periodical literature written in English, explaining the physical attributes of the “Hindoo” immigrants, referring to the early Sikh pioneers. Notable are several works written by a prominent journalist, Saint Nihal Singh (b. 1884), who in his writing career of more than three decades wrote several books in English as *India's Fighters: Their Mettle, History and Services to Britain*, *India's Fighting Troops*, *Progressive British India*, *Japan's Modernization*, *Glimpses of the Orient Today*, *Essays on India*, among many others, and contributed regularly with articles in periodicals discussing the new woman in India, alcohol prohibition, Indian patriotic songs, and other topics to familiarize the Western world with the East Indian culture and beliefs. His article series, for instance, “As an Indian Sees America,” published in *Hindustan Review* in 1909, offers how he was perceived as a stranger by Americans with racial prejudice against a brown man in America. His writings reflect the anticolonial Indian spirit, attempting to dissipate the Western distrust of the influx of Hindu immigrants.

Another writer writing about the early Indian pioneers was Nand Singh Sihra, who, after finishing his studies in Amritsar, went to Britain to pursue a BA and eventually came to California to study mechanical engineering in 1913. In his article, “Indians in Canada: A Pitiable Account of Their Hardships by One who Comes from the Place and Knows Them” (1913), published in *Modern Review*, Sihra recounts the discriminatory immigration policies of the Canadian government that excluded and oppressed the Indians. Sunder Singh's article, “The Hindu in Canada” (1917) likewise highlights the discrimination meted out to the Sikh immigrants by the Canadian government's refusal to allow the families of Sikhs to join them in new homelands. Singh's detailed explanation of the circumstances leading to the Sikhs' chartering of the SS Komagata Maru steamer ship to arrive in Canada from Hong Kong in 1914, followed by the Canadian government's refusal to allow the 376 Indian passengers to disembark and instead be deported, exemplifies this anti-Sikh prejudice. The journey of Komagata Maru has become a strong historical reference point to represent the

racially exclusionary restrictions imposed by the Canadian government in several literary works subsequently.

From the 1920s to 1947, the early immigrants, while seeking to establish their communities, were also seeking solidarity for the ongoing Indian independence movement. Sikhs broadly identified as “Hindoos” felt the need to affirm their difference amidst the exclusionary racial politics. The periodical literature thus continued to introduce the Sikh ideals and philosophies, along with other Indian concepts to the Western world, confirming ideas of self-determinism amidst racial hate, prejudice, and exclusion. Bhai Jodh Singh’s “The Message of the Sikh Faith” (1929) elaborates on the basic tenets of Guru Nanak for Western readers. Likewise, several lecture series offered by Sikh scholars such as Bhagat Singh Thind, Anup Singh Dhillon, and Bhagwan Singh Gyanee acknowledge the contributions of Indian pioneers, including the Sikhs. Bhagat Singh Thind remains notable for not only being one of the earliest Sikh writers of the diaspora but also for being a spokesman for the naturalization rights of non-white US soldiers fighting in the First World War. Arriving in the US in 1913 and earning his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1916, Thind became the first turbaned Sikh soldier in the US Army after enlisting in 1918. Later, Thind became a spiritual teacher, lecturing on metaphysics, philosophy, spirituality, and divine wisdom. Following two failed attempts to get naturalized as an American citizen, Thind was finally able to claim his naturalization as a veteran in 1936. The Supreme Court’s *United States vs. Thind* legal case is seen as a remarkable decision in US immigration history. With the political turmoil of the Indian independence movement, and the emergence of revolutionary movements against the British rule in India as initiated by the Hindustan Gadar Party in California, political literature as pamphlets and bulletins were published by the Gadar Party to document the Indian freedom struggle. Thind was one of the founding members of the Ghadar Party. Familiar with the works of American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, he brought together the Sikh philosophy and Hindu scriptures in his writings. Drawing on comparative paradigms from different religions, he wrote several books, including *Radiant Road to Reality*, *Science of Union with God*, and *House of Happiness*. For Sikhs, the need to explain Sikhi to the Western world became an ontological necessity. Thus, Sadhu Singh Dhami’s booklet, *The Sikhs and Their Religion* (1943), published by the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver, Canada, showcases the basic tenets of the Sikh Gurus. Being one of the early pioneers who migrated to Canada as a teenager in 1922, finishing his high school education, working in the lumber mills, and eventually earning a PhD in educational psychology from the University of Toronto in 1937, Sadhu Singh Dhami eventually settled in Geneva. His fictionalized memoir, *Maluka* (1978), is one of the first novels in English by a Sikh writer about the experiences of the early Sikh pioneers in Canada, delineating his journey as a young Sikh immigrant in the 1920s, the Ghadar party rebellion, and Indian independence struggle along with references to the painful memories of the Komagata Maru incident. Another notable name from the earliest Sikh pioneers is Kartar Kaur Dhillon, whose union activism, farm work organizing, and political activism through her involvement with the Black Panther movement as well as the Gadar Party exemplify her social justice beliefs.¹ Her autobiographical works, such as “The Parrot’s Beak” and “Astoria Revisited,” recount earlier experiences of growing up as a Sikh woman in America. Even though her essays appeared much later, they provide female perspectives on the earlier migration experiences. Another writer with a political career is Dalip Singh Saund, the first Sikh/Asian American to serve as a United States representative. Born in 1899 in Punjab, India, he moved to America for further studies in 1920, earning a PhD in mathematics in 1924 from UC Berkeley. In *My Mother India* (1930), Saund began a rebuttal to Katherine Mayo’s book, *Mother India*, highlighting the prevalent anti-Indian prejudice. His pamphlet on Indian leader Gandhi, titled, “Gandhi: The Man and His Message,” highlights Gandhi’s life, drawing comparisons with leaders

such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Giuseppe Mazzini. After eventually becoming a naturalized citizen in 1949, Saund geared up his political activism with help of many other Indians, enabling him to become the first South Asian congressman. His autobiographical work, *Congressman from India*, recounts his experiences of coming to America, facing political challenges, and then overcoming them to succeed in his political ambitions. Like Bhagat Singh Thind, he was also a champion of citizenship rights for Indians who were barred from becoming US citizens and could not own or lease land as farmers. Another interesting memoir narrating the experiences of an early California farm worker Charan Singh Sandhu is titled *Ghadari Baba: Charan Singh Sandhu* (1987). Among the later Sikh settlers from Yuba City, California, Hari Singh Everest is remarkable for his writings on the Sikh diasporic experiences. Born in pre-partitioned India, he immigrated to the USA in 1955 and received his master's in communications from Stanford University while working as a farmer. As a turban-wearing practicing Sikh with an unshorn beard, he was unable to get a job as a professor. As the first South Asian teacher in the Yuba-Sutter school system, Everest was actively involved with the California Department of Education and wrote more than 500 articles that appeared during the 1980s and 1990s in newspapers and journals, including *Sikh Sansar*, *The Yuba-Sutter Appeal-Democrat*, and *The Stanford Daily*. He also won the Gold Poet award for his poems. His short story "Land of Five Rivers" reimagines his Punjabi homeland in his representation of the Sacramento Valley. His archived letters to the editors reflect his strong engagement with his community and Sikh perspectives.

Most literature produced in the first half of the twentieth century by Sikh writers was comprised of narratives predominantly on self-representation and traced the challenges of anti-Sikh, exclusionary laws working against the Sikhs in new homelands. Poetic expressions in English mainly came in the latter part of the twentieth century although poetry in Punjabi was evident through Gadar literature aiming to inspire revolutionary ideals amongst the diasporic Indians. Many poems, originally written in Punjabi, were translated into English and included those written by Kartar Singh Sarabha, Kartar Singh Hundal, Kesar Singh, and others. As more generations of Sikh emigrants left India in 1950 following the new quota for Indian immigration, leading to a peak in the 1960s, many "twice migrants" Sikhs chose to leave Kenya and Uganda in the 1970s for new homelands in the UK, the USA, and Canada (Tatla 2013: 40). With increased migration came the desire for good education, professional skills, and an affirmative sense of belonging. With more liberalization of immigration policies in North America, many Sikhs who faced persecution in the post-1984 political climate chose to migrate to Western countries.

Thus, writers have explored shifting, complex, and variegated depictions of Sikh identities and examined history from the lenses of colonialism, migrations, gender, and social justice. Although history from pre-independence India may not be a focus of representation for many diasporic Sikh writers, UK-based Amarpal Singh Sidhu's *The First Anglo Sikh War* (2010) and *The Second Anglo-Sikh War* (2016), which explore the military history and the two battles after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and *The Siege of Delhi* (2021), about the 1857 Indian Mutiny against the British East India Company, are notable works. Also notable is the collaborated work *The Four Quartets of the Night* (1995) written by Tara Singh Bains and Hugh Johnston, relating the migratory journey of Tara Singh Bains from Punjab to Canada. Swaran Singh Kahlon's well-researched travelogue trilogy comprising *Sikhs in Latin America: Travels among Sikh Diaspora* (2011), *Sikhs in Asia Pacific: Travels among Sikh Diaspora from Yangon to Kobe* (2016), and *Sikhs in Continental Europe* (2020) remarkably depict the struggles of Sikh settlers migrating to other countries.

Diasporic knowledge production in creative representations has been framed within the tussles of Sikh traditions, modernity, and historical conflicts as well as individual perspectives about Sikh thought. Further, the legacy of earlier pioneers has been extended by the subsequent generations

of Sikh writers incorporating postcolonial hybridity, bilingualism negotiated between Punjabi and English as well as with the emergence of the newer media forms of narrativity including visual narratives and graphic novels. Interestingly, translation also became crucial for writings originally written in Punjabi to English as well as bilingual writings for a wider readership. Many Punjabi-Canadian authors, like Giani Kesar Singh, Navtej Bharati, Ajmer Rode, Surjeet Kelsey, Sadhu Binning, Sukhwant Hundal, and Gurcharan Rampuri, chose to either write simultaneously in Punjabi and English or have Punjabi works translated into English. In the UK, Rupinder Singh Dhillon, Harjeet Atwal, and Amarjit Chandan represent well the turmoil of shifting homelands, and in the US, Punjabi poets such as Ravinder Sahraa, Sukhdarshan Dhaliwal, Pashaura Singh, Prabhsharan-deep Singh highlight Sikh issues.

Hybridity and Sikh Diaspora in the Twenty-first Century

With subsequent generations of Sikh diaspora born in new homelands and negotiating their hybrid identities across differences of class, gender, sexuality, and ideological approaches, there is an increased representation by Sikhs who not only acknowledge inherited legacies but even investigate or challenge their traditional paradigms. Thus, themes like conflicting approaches to the Sikh collectivist ethos and Western individualism, traditional patriarchy and modern feminism, inherited histories of trauma, and attempts of self-affirmation are apparent in many literary works in diverse genres. Canadian poet Kuldip Gill's poetry collections *Dharma Rasa* (1999) and *Valley Sutra* (2009) showcase some of these themes to create memorials of migration. Phinder Dulai's three poetry collections establish him as a poet negotiating his multicultural identities drawn from his Indian heritage, British birth, and Canadian upbringing. *Ragas from the Periphery* (1995) showcases his experimentation with language and musical ragas to explore the poetic tensions; *Basmati Brown* (2000) reflects his journey while traveling through India; and *dream/arteries* (2014) presents a historiographic, poetic remembrance of the 376 passengers of Komagata Maru steamship who were denied entry to Canada in 1914. In the UK, Daljit Nagra's *Oh My Rub* (2003), *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007), *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (2012), *Ramayana* (2013), *British Museum* (2017), Mona Arshi's *Small Hands* (2015), and *Dear Big God* (2019); Sandeep Parmar's *The Marble Orchard* (2012) and *Eidolon* (2015) all provide a kaleidoscope of issues faced by the Sikh diaspora. US-born Jaswinder Bolina has likewise written remarkable works of poetry at the interstices of language and crossroads of his Sikh and American identity in *Carrier Wave* (2007), *Phantom Camera* (2013), *The Tallest Building in America* (2014), *The 44th of July* (2019). Sikh Canadian Jaspreet Singh's two poetry collections, *November* (2017) and *How to Hold a Pebble* (2022), deal with the trauma of memories, migration, and more. Another promising poet from the UK is the poet laureate Kuli Kohli, who, as a disability activist living with cerebral palsy, offers her poignantly thought-provoking experiences of otherness in *Patchwork* (2016) and *A Wonder Woman* (2019).

Equally remarkable are the poetic contributions of contemporary Sikh writers who as "insta-poets" have utilized social media platforms such as Instagram to share their poetry. Canadian Rupinder Kaur's rise to fame with her first book *Milk and Honey* (2015), which was originally self-published and became a bestseller, followed by her second book, *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017), points to the increased readership of poetry. UK-based Nikita Gill's prolific writings as an "instapoet" with six poetry collections point to the imperative desire for emotional connections across cultures and identities. Gill's *Your Soul Is a River* (2016), *Wild Embers: Poems of Rebellion, Fire and Beauty* (2017), *Fierce Fairytales: & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul* (2018), *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters* (2019), *Your Heart Is the Sea* (2019), and *The Girl and the Goddess* (2020) engender connections across several themes. Sikh Canadian poet Jasmin Kaur is notable for her debut poetry/prose

collection *When You Ask Me Where I'm Going* (2019). Her recent novel *If I Tell You the Truth* (2021) relates the trauma and fear of female migration and the resultant healing. With more Sikh poets emerging with different experiences, orientations, and identities, the future of poetry by the Sikh diaspora is assuredly encouraging and versatile in print as well as digital media. Spoken word artists such as Sukhjeet Kaur Khalsa from Australia, Jaspreet Kaur from East London, and Humble the Poet from Toronto have successfully established themselves through digital platforms like Youtube and Instagram. Canadian poet Sharanpal Kaur Ruprai's poetry collections, *Seva* (2014) and *Pressure Cooker Love Bombs* (2019), remind us to rethink gender conformity within the Sikh community through questions of identity. Likewise, Sikh American poets have woven tapestries of images, memories, and diverse experiences. Taran Singh's debut collection of poems, *Time and Knots* (2018), ruminates over the whirlwinds of time and labyrinths of human emotions. Parvinder Mehta's debut poetry collection, *On Wings of Words* (2021), presents vignettes from the Sikh diasporic experiences and challenges of imagining a socially just world in contemporary times.

Along with poetry, many contemporary Sikh writers have successfully chosen fiction and non-fiction as mediums to highlight the historical legacies and other vagaries of the diasporic consciousness. From the nonfictional writings by the early Sikh immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century to contemporary writings, fiction has become an effectively popular genre. Canadian-American author Shauna Singh Baldwin's notable works of fiction include *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996), *What the Body Remembers* (2000), *The Tiger Claw* (2004), *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007), and *The Selector of Souls* (2012) evoke the struggles of immigrants as well as memories of a history begone, while her nonfictional works offer critical commentary through a co-authored text, *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America* (1992) and *Reluctant Rebellions* (2016). Bhira Backhaus's debut novel, *Under the Lemon Trees* (2009), shows a young teenage girl coming to terms with her Sikh identity. More recent authors include Singapore-based Balli Kaur Jaswal with four novels, *Inheritance* (2013), *Sugarbread* (2016), *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* (2017), and *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* (2019), and a new novel, *Now You See Us*, forthcoming in 2023. In the UK, Sunjeev Sahota's three novels, *Ours Are the Streets* (2011), *The Year of the Runways* (2015), and *China Room* (2021) have added to the conversations around South Asian immigrants, including Sikhs. British journalist Sathnam Sanghera also explores his journey for self through his memoir, *The Boy with the Topknot* (2008), and his novel, *Marriage Material* (2013), depicts cross-generational challenges of the Sikh immigrant experience and shares his critical commentary on the British imperial past and its influence on modern Britain in *Empireland: How Imperialism has Shaped Modern Britain* (2021). Gurjinder Basran's novels, *Everything Was Goodbye* (2010), *Someone You Love* (2017), and *Help! I'm Alive* (2022) depict through the stories of Indo-Canadian characters the challenges of loss and conflicts with tradition. Rupinder Gill's memoir, *On the Outside Looking Indian* (2011), takes a humorous dig at her childhood longings while growing up in a Sikh household.

For some Sikh women, migration linked with enforced marriages and oppressive lives finds representation in autobiographical narratives. Sharan-Jeet Shan's memoir, *In My Own Name: An Autobiography* (1987), advocates against arranged marriages. Kiranjit Ahluwalia's *The Circle of Light* (1997) recounts her experiences of being in an abusive marriage, murdering her husband by burning him alive, and subsequently undergoing imprisonment for her violent act. Another British author, Jasvinder Sanghera, has written novels on the darker realities of immigrant experiences through her writings. Her memoir, *Shame* (2007), recounts her forced marriage, and stories of other South Asian women are narrated in *Daughters of Shame* (2009) and continued in *Shame Travels* (2011). Canada-born Sandeep Morrison's memoir, *Lady Bitch Whore* (2018), and Jaspreet Kaur's recent debut memoir, *Brown Girl Like Me* (2022), unpack diverse issues about South Asian womanhood, offering feminist manifestos. Other themes have also been tackled in more recent literature. British writer

Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal's novel *Tourism* (2006) depicts the "bad-boy" culture in twenty-first-century multicultural London through his provocative and gritty handling of consumerism and tourism. Canada-born Ranj Dhaliwal's two novels, *Daaku* (2006) and *Daaku: The Gangster's Life* (2011), delineate the Indo-Canadian gang culture. Sikh Canadian writer Sohan Singh Koonar's novel *Karam's Kismet* (2012) focuses on the life of a low-caste man traversing through the challenges of his identity and tradition, while *Paper Lions* (2019) is about three multigenerational characters who face historical hardships from the post-Second World War to the modern times in the 1960s.

In fiction, as in poetry, 1984 is centered as a watershed historical moment of trauma for Sikhs, along with the resultant grief and unbelonging due to generational memories of loss. British Sikh Simarjit Kaur's novel *Saffron Salvation* (1999) specifically focuses on 1984, and her other novels include *Lakhi and Amarpal: The Boy Who Left His Heart in Punjab*, *Deepa's Wedding*, and *The Students* delineate the sufferings of Sikhs. Sikh Canadian Jaspreet Singh's novel *Helium* (2013) also highlights the trauma of 1984. His other works include the novels *Chef* and *Face*, the short story collection *Seventeen Tomatoes*, as well as two poetry collections. His latest work is his memoir, *My Mother, My Translator* (2022). Sarbpreet Singh's *The Camel Merchant of Philadelphia* (2019) represents the world of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and recent stories of 1984 are presented in *Night of the Restless Spirits* (2021). Within the nonfictional genre, the art of essay-writing (more prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century by the early pioneers and subsequent immigrants) has also assumed importance through opinion pieces, blogs, and published essays. Alternative forms of literary expression have emerged through digital platforms to expand onto different forms, especially through web blogs such as SikhNet, Sikhchic, Langarhall, American Turban, and others showcasing diverse insights. Canada-based T. Sher Singh's *The Lion and the Princess* (2018) presents insightful, personal essays connecting Sikh concepts with his experiences of migration, and his recent book *India's 1984* revisits the tragic anti-Sikh violence through insightful essays. US-born Jaswinder Bolina's *Of Color* provides insightful essays on being a person of color and dealing with structures embedded across dominant languages and identities, forcing one to investigate the relevance of immigrant identities in minority discourse. Meeta Kaur's edited anthology, *Her Name Is Kaur* (2014), highlights personal narratives of Sikh American women coming to terms with their multiple roles. Valerie Kaur's *See No Stranger* (2021) offers commentary on the idea of revolutionary love in the post-9/11 world, and Simran Jeet Singh's *The Light We Give* (2022) delves into life lessons in a part memoir, part commentary style.

Another interesting genre that has taken a foothold in recent years is the emerging children's literature and young adult literature responding to the systemic racism, hate, and oppression in the post-9/11 world. While authors like Jessi Kaur, Inni Kaur, Parveen Kaur Dhillon, Pushpinder Singh, Gurmeet Kaur, Navjot Kaur, Bhajneet Singh, and many others write children's books (including illustrated books) focusing on Sikh religion and history, the imperatives of centering diverse voices and experiences have inspired several writers to write narratives for teenagers and young adults. Neesha Meminger's books are notable for their focus on teen perspectives and experiences of dealing with racism and identity conflicts. Her debut novel, *Shine, Coconut Moon* (2010), showcases a teen protagonist learning about her Sikh identity in post-9/11 America, *Jazz in Love* (2011) is about a high school girl whose parents try to arrange guided dating for her, *Into the Wise Dark* (2012) is a fantasy novel with time travel, and *What Girls Know* (2019) is her memoir novel in verse about her sexual abuse and healing from the trauma. Ekjoatroop Kaur's dystopian novel *For the Sake of It* (2022) shows a futuristic America after the third world war. Navdeep Singh Dhillon's debut novel, *Sunny G's Series of Rash Decisions* (2022), presents a young Sikh boy undergoing an unplanned prom adventure. UK-based, 10 years old Amrit Kaur's *Adventures with the Yeti* (2022) presents an adventure tale of a family holiday. Anita Kharbanda's debut YA novel, *Lioness of Punjab* (2022), represents the story of Mai Bhago, a female Sikh warrior from the seventeenth century.

Compared to fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, the contributions in the field of drama may seem less yet not dismal. With few Sikh playwrights, the corpus of dramatic literature is still developing; many of the playwrights have reiterated the tugs and tussles in immigrant lives. A notable name is UK-based Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, who has written several plays and teleplays. While her debut play, *Behsharam* (2002), about the shame of two daughters living with their bigamous father and two mothers broke box office records, her second play, *Behzti* (2005), about rape in the Sikh gurdwara provoked the wrath of the Sikh community causing the play to be canceled and her going into hiding. Subsequently, she wrote *Behud* (2010), *Fourteen* (2014) about challenges in teenage life, and *Khandan* (2014) showcasing a family drama along with several other screenplays. Shauna Singh Baldwin's play *We Are So Different Now* (2009) offers a feminist commentary on arranged marriages through a contemporary representation of the mythological character Draupadi and her interactions with the female protagonist. UK-based Satinder Kaur Chohan has written plays *Zameen* (2008), focusing on Punjabi farmer suicides; *1984* (2014), on the shocking massacre of Sikhs; *Made in India* (2017), about three women in a surrogacy clinic in Gujarat; *Half of Me* (2016), about children born through assisted reproduction; and *Lotus Beauty* (2022), about multigenerational women in a beauty salon. Sundeep Morrison's one-woman dramatic show, *Raghead*, addresses the 2012 anti-Sikh massacre in Oak Creek Gurdwara in Wisconsin and hate crimes against Sikhs in the post-9/11 world. Another UK-based playwright is Shaan Sahota, a medical doctor, whose debut play, *The Estate* (2020), handles a Sikh family's dilemma over disputed inheritance, and a commissioned, immersive audio-drama, *Under the Mask* (2021), shows a doctor's narrative on the pandemic. Jaclyn Backhaus' debut play, *Men on Boats* (2015), depicts the historical 1869 expedition on the Colorado River with a hilarious subversion of white male history, and her second play, *India Ale Pale* (2018), depicts issues of belonging and rebellion inspired by her mother, Bhira Backhaus, at the backdrop of pirate ancestors. Another promising playwright is Canada-based queer Sikh Dalbir Singh, whose plays include radio plays *Bani Tunnel* and *Kala Pani*, and theatrical productions, *Your Palace in the Sky: The Bombing of Air India 182* and *Five Red Hands* (2021). In the US, Sarbpreet Singh's play *Kultar's Mime* (2014), adapted from his 1990 poem, co-authored with J. Mehr Kaur, remembers the trauma of the anti-Sikh violence of 1984.

Ultimately, with multiple operative lenses to depict Sikh migration and meaning, the literature of the Sikh diaspora is an evolving corpus of representation. The evocative ethos that most contemporary writers have adopted in their writings not only frames their diverse experiences of migration through narratives about religious, cultural, and sociopolitical conflicts but also challenges the predominant identity politics amidst questions of multiculturalism as well as globalization. Currently, the Sikh diaspora, as a globally dispersed diaspora, is learning to navigate the transnational connections to the native homeland while also strengthening its roots in the new homelands. The creative praxis especially in the case of the millennial writers of the Sikh diaspora, who had been born as members of the second-, even third-generation immigrants, reveals a much different circulation of diasporic agency and concerns. With the younger generations of emerging Sikh writers, there is a potential shift from historiographic narratives recounting challenges of Indian Sikhs vis-à-vis their attempts of self-determinism and their subsequent ethnocentric foci on crucial events from Indian history such as the reimagining of colonial times, the political backdrop of pre-independence India, which witnessed the Singh Sabha movement, horrific violence during the Partition of India and Pakistan, the struggles for self-affirmation that aggravated political conflict in Punjab in the 1980s and the 1990s, and the politics of assimilation for the Sikhs in the diaspora. Thus, while writings in the twentieth century highlight the diverse dimensions of the very process of migration and transnational experiences, much contemporary literature also traces a shift towards the host country

and even asks to reclaim agency through the inherited legacies of the early Sikh pioneers and carve affirmative spaces of belonging. The future of upcoming literary contributions by Sikh diaspora writers is promising indeed.

Note

- 1 Born in 1915 to Bakshish Singh (who came to America in 1897) and Rattan Kaur (who joined in 1910 as the first Punjabi woman to arrive in America), Kartar Dhillon is believed to be the first Sikh woman who was born in USA. Her parents were also among the founding members of the Ghadar Party.

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PART VI

Music, Art, and Architecture



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SINGING THE SCRIPTURE

Sikh Kīrtan in Literature, Practices, and Musicological Studies

Francesca Cassio

Introduction

The singing of devotional hymns, known as *śabad* or *Gurbāṇī kīrtan*, is one of the foundational practices established by the first Sikh Gurū, Nānak (1469–1539). Accompanied on the *rabāb* (a fretless lute) played by the Muslim musician Bhāī Mardānā, the founder of the Sikh faith left his message in songs set to melodic frameworks called *rāgas*. To Gurū Nānak, who defined himself as the *dhādhī* (bard) of the *Akāl Purakh* (Timeless Creator), are attributed 974 *śabads* (lyrical hymns) in 19 *rāgas* and 26 melodic variants. These constitute the ground of a poetical and musical repertory that flourished during the time of the following nine Sikh gurūs, between the late fifteenth century and the early eighteenth century. Incorporating a preexisting tradition of devotional poetry passed on through songs, over the first decades of Sikh history, the musical settings of the lyrical hymns also worked as aural–oral modes to memorize and impart the Sikh Gurūs’ teachings. Remembered by the Sikh *Panth* (community), this knowledge was initially transmitted and embodied by way of listening, reciting, and singing, which originated an oral tradition still prevalent among Sikhs even today (Singh 2000). Recent scholarship, however, indicates Gurū Nānak’s urgency in preserving his *śabads* in a written form. The hypothesis that early forms of Sikh scripture trace back to Gurū Nānak is corroborated by the analysis of some compositions attributed to him, as well as by studies of manuscripts that predate the formation of the Sikh canonical scripture (Mann 2001; Singh 2000). It was with the second Gurū (1504–1552) – whose spiritual name of Angad (lit. *limb*) was meant to mark a continuity with Gurū Nānak’s legacy – that a distinctive script called *gurumukhī* (lit. “the Gurūs’ mouth”) was developed and eventually utilized for notating the text of the *śabads* as an aid to memorization. Based on this direct line of aural and written sources, the earliest manuscripts (available to scholars) trace back to the 1570s, the time of the third Sikh Guru, Amar Dās (1479–1574). Known as the *Goindval pothīs*, these volumes encompass Gurū Nānak’s verses, along with 62 *slokas* (invocations) by the second Gurū, 907 hymns by Gurū Amar Dās, and a selection of *rāga*-based songs attributed to Bhakti and Sufi poet-saints of the medieval era. Notably, like the coeval anthologies of devotional songs, these early manuscripts were compiled according to the *rāga-rāgini* system that was used to classify melodic types. This musical criterion seems to indicate the consistent role of singing in the context of worship. By the early seventeenth century, the number of musical and poetical compositions had increased to more than 5,000, with the contributions of the fourth Gurū

Rām Dās (1534–1581) – who added another 11 rāgas and 679 compositions – and the considerable input of the fifth Gurū, Arjan (1563–1606), to whom are attributed 2,218 hymns. In 1604, Gurū Arjan collected this vast body of liturgical poems in the first canonical version of the Sikh scripture, also known as *Ādī Granth* (lit. “first book”). Written in *gurumukhī*, the text is articulated in more than 20 vernacular languages, to signify the *pluriversal* nature of the divine Word that “speaks” to all. There is enough evidence that – based on previous manuscripts – Gurū Arjan shaped the Sikh Scripture in a distinct way not only by including, and in some cases re-classifying, the śabads of the first five Gurūs according to specific rāgas, but also by editing the selections of Bhakti and Sufi songs, for the sake of theological and musical consistency (Singh 2000).

In its modern printed form, the Sikh Scripture has reached a standard format of 1,430 pages, divided into three main sections. The first is a short segment (pages 1–13) that includes the prayers for early morning (*Japjī*) and hymns for the evening (*Rahrās*) and night (*Sohilā*) liturgy. The last part of the *Granth*, from pages 1353 to 1430, is a miscellaneous section of short verses by the Sikh Gurūs and poet-saints, including hymns in praise of the Sikh Gurūs composed by the *bhatts* (court poets). The main corpus of the scripture, spanning pages 14 to 1353, is constituted by a vast body of songs arranged by musical and poetical criteria. But unlike the early Sikh manuscripts, this central section is indexed according to 30 main rāgas that do not follow the *rāga-rāgini* classification. Within each musical segment, named after a rāga, the hymns are archived by their authors and by poetic forms, from shortest to longest. The same schema was preserved in the later version of the volume, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (henceforth GGS), recompiled by the last Gurū, Gobind Singh (1666–1708). In this *Granth*, the tenth gurū added 116 hymns and a new rāga (*Jaijavantī*) credited to his father, the ninth Gurū, Teg Bahadur (1621–1675). Before his death, Gurū Gobind Singh attributed sovereign authority to the GGS and to the *Word* (*Bāṇī*) as the sole living, eternal Gurū of the baptized Sikhs.

“*The Word, the Bāṇī is Gurū, and Gurū is the Bāṇī. Within the Bāṇī ambrosial nectar is contained,*” recites a well-known verse of Gurū Rām Dās (GGS: 982). The *Word-as-Gurū* not only is one of the most important conceptual continuities from Gurū Nānak to Gurū Gobind Singh, that gives “Sikh thought” a certain uniqueness (Mandair 2009), but it must be the focal point of attention of the devotees’ mind.

To indicate the primary importance of the Word over the musical rendition, Sikh scholars and practitioners unanimously designate Sikh kīrtan as *śabad pradhān* (“text-driven”). In this epistemological context, the musical setting is intended as subservient to the Word-Gurū, and therefore, this genre of singing is known as *śabad kīrtan* or *Gurbāṇī kīrtan*. The *śabad/Gurbāṇī kīrtan* practice is held among (and by) the community members, as part of the liturgical function, along with the reading (*pāth*), the explanation (*kathā*) of the *Bāṇī*, and prayers (*ardās*). *Kīrtan* is generally (but not exclusively) performed in the Sikh temple, the *gurdwārā*, where singers sit on a side facing the Scripture and the *sangat* (Figure 1), to offer their selfless service (*sewā*). There are various types of kīrtan settings, from the plain congregational singing, to the “solo” performance of temple musicians (the *rāgīs* and – formerly – the *rabābīs*) specialized in the liturgical singing of the śabads according to the rāgas and poetical-musical forms indicated in the GGS.

In the “*purātan*” (centuries-old) tradition, kīrtan was taught as based on four “pillars,” namely, *rāga* (melodic framework), *tāla* (rhythmic cycle), *śabad* (Word), and *surti* (intentness). Although the Word is the most important among these, *purātan Gurbāṇī kīrtan* is a combination of all four of these aspects. As the thirteenth-generation Gurbāṇī kīrtan exponent Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains. “*Gurbāṇī, or the śabada is the Gurū, but neither rāga, tāla, nor surti are accorded the same status, even though without them, Gurbanī Kīrtana cannot exist*” (2019: 24). Of these four pillars, nowadays the *rāga* is arguably the most neglected and least known.

The impact of colonial modernity has dramatically affected the aural heritage of Gurbāṇī kīrtan, and over the past century, the rāga setting has become less relevant for the singing of the scriptural hymns. The rāga-based śābads that were once a profound means for conveying *gyan* (gnosis) among the early Sikh *Panth* are now deemed an elitist tradition, rendered only by few experts. In the scripture, in fact, only the names of the rāgas are mentioned, with no indication of their melodic outlines, which until the early twentieth century had been passed on orally. Preserved in archival recordings and in rare books with notation, the *purāṭan śābad rīts* (rāga-based heritage songs) are the tip of the iceberg of an entire cultural ecosystem that is now disappearing.

The musical settings of the scriptural hymns today range from spontaneous congregational singing, to newly composed songs according to twentieth century “classical” (*khyāl*) music, and studio-produced recordings following the music industry’s canons. Both this historical depth and perpetual change are *twain-phenomena* (Manuel 2015) common in other South Asian traditions, although have never been examined – until recently – in relation to Sikh music culture. Whereas there is an increasing interest around modern kīrtan forms, the study of the Sikh musical heritage has been absent from (ethno)musicological scholarship. Only in the early twenty-first century was Sikh musicology introduced in Indian and Western universities for the study of the musical knowledges – intangible and tangible assets – to perform śābad kīrtan.

Kīrtan in (ethno)Musicological Literature

Kīrtan is an umbrella term that designates the singing of devotional poetry, performed in contexts deemed heterodox according to modern Brahmanical-Hindu culture. Derived from the Sanskrit root *kīrt* (to “glorify”), kīrtan is often translated into English as “eulogy,” or more commonly as “praise song,” for the congregational worship of Hindu deities. The term appears in Hindu epic literature but is not found in early sources of Indian music history. As a music practice, kīrtan acquired popularity in the medieval *bhakti* (devotional) literature across South Asia, from Bengal to the Punjab, with some common musical traits as well as significant epistemic differences. To this day, however, the genre is still viewed as an heterogeneous category of devotional musics, generally affertent to Hindu ideologies about sacred sound (Beck 2019; Slawek 1988). While the term *kīrtan* is recurrent in the GGS, as associated with the singing of rāga-based songs, the Gurbāṇī heritage is yet a neglected area of study by ethnomusicology and deemed a peripheral variant of a “greater” Brahmanical-Hindu tradition.

This conceptual framework is rooted in Orientalist (ethno)musicological scholarship, according to which South Asian musics were classified according into *Great Traditions* and *Little Traditions* (Powers 1980).

The category of *Great Traditions* includes pan-regional genres, “classical” art-forms founded upon explicit theoretical principals, verbalized in written literature, based on the rāga system, patronized and performed by professional musicians. At the opposite end, the *Little Traditions* encompass “folk” and local text-driven songs, set on implicit theoretical principles, not rāga-based, performed by nonprofessional musicians. The finding of rāga-based kīrtan traditions (such as those preserved in Vaiṣṇava and Gurbāṇī heritages), pushed ethnomusicologists to rediscuss this binary classification, investigating the complex dynamics within, and among, traditions. More recently, while addressing the implications of mapping musics according to hegemonic “classical” art-forms and subaltern “folk” expressions, contemporary scholarship is questioning the notion of rāgas’ knowledge as an exclusive privilege of elite milieus. In this context, the case study of Gurbāṇī kīrtan plays today a significant role in revealing far-reaching implications that challenge the dominant historical narrative of South Asian music established in the colonial and modern era. Through a decolonizing

approach – which implies the recognition and undoing of colonially derived hierarchical structures (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) – the following sections debate Gurbāṇī kīrtan in the context of pre-modern musical literatures, where it originated.

The Pada-Rāga Unit – Kīrtan in Pre-Modern Traditions

Gurbāṇī sangīt (lit. “music”) is an expression that encompasses all the musical knowledges to perform śabad kīrtan. Its heritage represents one of the few traditions that have preserved a rāga-based body of devotional songs, from the pre-modern era to this day. In order to seize the historical depth of this repertory, Gurbāṇī sangīt will be discussed here in the context of coeval devotional musics of the Vaiśnava congregations in the Vraj region (in modern Uttar Pradesh). From a musicological perspective, all these traditions practiced “text-driven” kīrtans, based on devotional *padas* (poems), set to rāgas and “big” *tālas* (long slow-paced rhythmic cycles).

Meaning *verse*, and more broadly “poetic composition written according to metrical rules” (Kāhn Singh Nābhā 1930), *pada* is a term recurrent in the medieval literature as well as in the headings of the Sikh scriptural hymns. Intended as *poem for singing* (Sanyal and Widdess 2004), in early music literature, *pada* is one of the six constituents of the *prabhandā*, an “archetypal song of praise offered to a deity or to a royal patron” (Rowell 1992: 274). In the GGS, *pade* (plural of *pada*) are poetic compositions identified according to the number of units that compose a poem as, for instance, *ekpade* (one-unit), *dupade* (two units), *tipade* (three units), *chaupade* (four units), *panchpade* (five), and *āṣṭpadi* (a type of long hymn in eight stanzas). Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains that in the context of Gurbāṇī sangīt, *pada* constitutes a distinct compositional genre, which is at the foundation of the Gurbāṇī *dhur-pada* songs, or the “revealed” *pada* of the *Dhur*, the Creator (Cassio 2015).

In particular, it is the arrangement of the *pada* laid on a four-section structure (namely, *asthāi*, *antarā*, *sancārī* and *ābhog*) to be a distinct characteristic of this devotional song-form, which in Vaiśnava traditions is known as *Viśnu-pada* (composition in honor of Viśnu), or *dhruvad*. This latter term is also recurrent to indicate a genre of court music that scholars believe to derive from *dhruva-pada prabandha*, where the term “*dhruva*” (lit. fix) stands as a repeatable refrain (Sanyal and Widdess 2004).

The *dhruvads* transmitted to this day in the kīrtan literature of the Vaiśnava congregations have been preserved in two main traditions: the *samāja gāyan* and the *havelī sangīta*. *Samāja gāyan* is “congregational singing” of *padas* according to an antiphonal structure, in which the lead singer exposes a phrase, then repeated by the other singers in the group. With some differences in their literature, *samāja gāyan* is practiced among the *Nimbārka Sampradāya* (founded by the thirteenth-century philosopher Nimbārka), the *Rādhāvallabh Sampradāya* (founded by the sixteenth-century poet Hita Harivaṇśa), and the *Haridāsī Sampradāya* founded by poet-saint Swāmī Haridās (1480–1575). Notably – like the Gurbāṇī – these Vaiśnava traditions have their *padas* collected in anthologies organized according to rāgas. The *havelī sangīta* is prevalent, instead, among the Vallabha Sampradāya founded by Shrī Vallabhachariya Mahāprabhū (1479–1531), a contemporary of Gurū Nānak. The *havelī sangīta* preserved a four-fold *dhruvad* form that scholars deem to be the closest link between devotional temple music and the “classical” music of the courts (Thielemann 1997).

It is still debated, though, whether the temple *dhruvad* (and *dhur-pada*) is derived from the court tradition or vice versa. The majority of ethnomusicologists tend to interpret the use of *dhruvad* and rāgas in devotional music as adopted from the Great Tradition, meaning that the temple repertory was “borrowed” from art-form songs composed by specialized court musicians (Williams 2020; Miner 2015; Linden 2013).

With particular regard to the use of rāgas as the organizing principle of the devotional anthologies, in a comparative study of Sikh and Vaiśnava literature, Allyn Miner concludes that – due to the

technicalities of the rāga system – the creator of the melody must necessarily be a music specialist and, therefore “the bhakti composers or compilers were likely linked to courtly music-specialist circles” (Miner 2015: 397). On a similar note, in relation to the śabad kīrtan repertory, other scholars maintain that Sikh religious leaders employed (Muslim) court musicians to compose rāga-based dhrupads for ritual use (Sanyal and Widdess 2004). But the notion of the rāga composer as a music specialist seems to contrast with the foundation of pada as one *aesthetic unit* made of lyrics and music. Padas in fact are “not poems set to music, but they are created within a well-defined set-up (rāga), with a particular rhythmic pattern (tala) by a vāggeyakāra, a poet composer” (Delvoye 2013: 147). This concept of pada as one unit that binds together the lyrics with their sonic settings might explain the headings of the Sikh scriptural hymns, in which padas are always associated with rāgas. By separating the literary from the sounded Word, modern interpretations have relegated the musical dimension of the śabad to an aesthetic experience, a mere decoration of the written verse. This colonially derived view had also an impact on the vocabulary. An example is the incorporation of the English expression “classical music,” to designate rāga-based genres performed by court musicians, for an elitist audience.

While cross-pollination between the temple and court traditions has arguably happened at different times in mutual directions, the consequence of regarding rāgas as an exclusive feature of the so-called “classical” music, generated the misconception that any rāga-based kīrtan is necessarily in a “classical style” and, therefore, adopted from court music culture.

Singing the Sikh Scripture according to rāgas

“*Kathā Kīrtan Rāg Nād Dhun Ehu Bāñō Suāo*”

[*Kathā, Kīrtan, Rāg, Nād, Dhun, this has become the meaning of my life*]

(GGS: 818)

Decolonial and postcolonial scholarship have long recognized the *oculocentric* bias of the Enlightenment rationality and colonial modernity. Only recently though, scholars are unearthing epistemologies based on the “ear” as cognitive apparatus and on *aurality* as a mode of knowing (Feld 2017; Hess 2015; Ochoa-Gautier 2014). The call to “listening” is consistent in the devotional literature of the pre-modern era, from Jaideva to Kabir, as well as reiterated by the Sikh gurūs. Unlike reading, listening is not the privilege of a few but is a transversal act, accessible to all regardless of social status, gender, or literacy. As described in the verse mentioned previously, “*kathā, kīrtan, rāg, nād, dhun*” are complementary components of the Sikh experience that entail listening, as a “*mode of knowing*” the Gurūs’ teaching. *Kathā* (exegesis), *kīrtan* (hymns’ singing), *nād* (‘struck’ audible sound), and *dhun* (folk tunes) are concepts that have a continuity to this day, whereas the knowledge and practice of rāga are the most neglected by contemporary performers and scholars, who disregard the rāga-based singing as an elitist, outdated norm. But what is a rāga? Do rāgas have a deeper dimension, a greater scope, than merely being the organizing principle of the scripture?

The word rāga designates a melodic framework governed by internal rules, like the specific functions and roles of notes, tuning, and characteristic movements. Derived from the Sanskrit root *ranj* (“to be colored, affected”), the term rāga remands to feeling, a defined sensorial experience, as an emotional response to a given melodic structure. According to Indian music theory, each rāga is associated with a specific emotional state, called *rasa*, which is “triggered by the musical clues implanted in the structure of a given melody” (Rowell 1992: 167).

One of the earliest definitions of rāga is found in Matanga Muni’s *Brhaddeśī* (lit. “The Great Deśī”), dated around the ninth century CE. In this treatise, Matanga classifies rāga as one of the seven song-forms (*gītī*) popular (*deśī*) during his time and describes it as “what colors the consciousness of all people” (Sarmadee 2003: 143).

Described in *shastras* (treatises) like the *Bṛhaddeśī*, *rāgas* are also known as *shastriya sangīt*, a term that Orientalist scholars have translated as “classical music.” However, Matanga’s reference helps to clarify that *rāga* is neither an exclusive experience, nor a unique feature of the “classical”/court art-music.

Notably, whereas the “court” traditions favored the musical elaboration of the *rāgas* over the text and evolved into *styles* (*bāṇīs*) represented by families of musicians (*gharānās*), the “temple” traditions (like the Vaiṣṇava discussed earlier, and the Gurbāṇī) preserved the melodic element of the *rāga* as the framework for the singing of religious texts (*pada-pradhān*). Just by going through the list of the *rāgas* according to which the Sikh canonical text is structured, one can have an idea of the musical breadth of the Gurbāṇī kīrtan repertory, which includes *rāgas* not known in other traditions. Some of the *rāgas* in the GGS, present melodic variants that are distinguished in *chāyālag* (blend of two *rāgas*) and *sankīrtan* (a composition of more than two *rāgas*). Counting these variants as actual *rāgas*, in the final version of the GGS, the number of the *rāgas* is 61. (There are however disagreements among scholars about four *rāgas*, which in the following list are indicated in *italics*).

- 1 Sṛī Rāg
- 2 Mājh
- 3 Gauṛī, Gauṛī Dīpkī, Gauṛī Guārerī, Gauṛī Dakḥṇī, Gauṛī Chaitī, Gauṛī Bairāgaṇ, Gauṛī Pūrbī Dīpkī, Gauṛī Pūrbī, Gauṛī Mājh, Gauṛī Mālvā, Gauṛī Mālā, Gauṛī Soraṭhī
- 4 Āsā (*Āsā Kāfī*, *Āsāvarī Sudhaṅg*, *Āsāvarī*, *Āsā Āsāvarī*)
- 5 Gūjṛī
- 6 Devgandhārī, *Devgandhar*
- 7 Bihāgrā
- 8 Vaḍhaṅs (*Vaḍhaṅs Dakḥṇī*)
- 9 Soraṭh
- 10 Dhanāsṛī
- 11 Jaitsṛī
- 12 Ṭoḍī
- 13 Bairāṇī
- 14 Tilāṅg (*Tilāṅg Kāfī*)
- 15 Sūhī (*Sūhī Kāfī*, *Sūhī Lalit*)
- 16 Bilāval (*Bilāval Dakḥṇī*, *Bilāval Maṅgal*)
- 17 Gonḍ (*Bilāval Gonḍ*)
- 18 Rāmkaṛī (*Rāmkaṛī Dakḥṇī*, *Rāmkaṛī Ānaṇḍ*)
- 19 Naṭ Nārāin (*Naṭ*)
- 20 Mālī Gauṛā
- 21 Mārū (*Mārū Kāfī*, *Mārū Dakḥṇī*)
- 22 Tukhārī
- 23 Kedārā
- 24 Bhāīrao
- 25 Basant (*Basant Hiṇḍol*)
- 26 Sāraṅg
- 27 Malār
- 28 Kāṇṛā
- 29 Kalyān (*Kalyān Bhopālī*)
- 30 Prabhātī (*Prabhātī Bibhās*, *Prabhātī Dakḥṇī*, *Bibhās Prabhātī*)
- 31 Jaijāvantī (added by the tenth Gurū in the early eighteenth century)

Some of these rāgas show a continuity from the medieval culture to this day (like *Srī rāga*, *Bhāīrao*, *Kalyān*, *Bilāval*). Other rāgas are found uniquely in the Sikh scripture, such as *rāga Mājh*, *Vaḍhaṅs*, *Marū*, *Tukhāī*, and some forms of *Gaurī*. In the case of *rāga Jaijāvantī*, a rāga also known in modern traditions, the first written account is found in the GGS, and therefore its “creation” is attributed to the ninth Gurū Teg Bahadur (1621–1675). There are also rāgas that show a connection with specific regions of South Asia, which reflects the *pluriversality* of the Sikh literature. Such as the so-called *Dakhṇī* forms (which indicate influence from Deccan, as the southern Indian subcontinent was known in ancient times), and the “*deśī*” (regional) rāgas (like *Āsā*, *Sūhī*, *Sorath*, *Prabhātī*), which are known and still practiced in some areas of Northwest India. The Gur-Sikh heritage has also preserved the memory of rāgas that predate the modern repertory but are no longer remembered in any contemporary traditions other than the *Gurbāṇī*. Such is the case of the *śudh* (“pure”) form of rāgas that we find only in their later *darbārī* (“court”) versions. For example, *rāga Kanṛā* and *rāga Malār*, transmitted in the *Gurbāṇī sangīt*, are deemed the *śudh* (pure, original) form of the rāgas *Darbārī Kanṛā* and *Miyān kī Malhar* attributed to the legendary court musician Miyān Tansen (1500 c.a.–1589). In this class of rāgas – whose practice was discontinued in nineteenth and twentieth century Hindustani classical music – we also find *rāga Gond*, which contemporary ethnomusicologists claim to be a “lost” rāga. (Schofield 2019).

It is still unclear the logic of the rāgas’ sequence in the Sikh canonical text compiled by Gurū Arjan, but scholars believe that *śabads* are grouped according to a melodic-thematic principle. This suggests an underlying link between the meaning of the verses, the emotional state (*rasa*) that the rāga conveys, and also the specific poetical-musical form in which the content is delivered.

Forms of Sung Poetry in the GGS

The majority of the scriptural hymns in the GGS are poetic compositions (*padas* or *pade*) with rhyming stanzas whose number of lines varies from very short to longer. Comparing the Sikh musical literature with other rāga-based *pada* repertories, “other dhrupadī traditions have not shown any variety of padās which the gurūs have very carefully logged in *Gurbāṇī*” (Singh B. 2019b). Another distinct feature of these hymns is the presence of a refrain called *rahāo* (lit. “pause”), which works musically as a ritornello, and “whose significance is emphasized by its often being composed in a somewhat different meter from the body of the hymn” (Shackle and Mandair 2005, p. xxiv). Sikh scripture also contains other poetical genres such as the *salok*, consisting of a pair of rhyming lines, meant more as an aphorism to be remembered than a composition to be sung. *Saloks* from the first four Gurūs have also been inserted by Gurū Arjan to link the stanzas of the *vāran* (singular *vār*), the ballads based on folk sung poetry that the Sikh Gurūs adapted to convey their teachings. In the GGS there are 22 *vāran*, authored by the first five Gurūs except for one *vār* (in *rāga Ramkalī*) attributed to the Muslim musicians (*rabābīs*) Sattā and Balwand. *Vāran* are long compositions, structured in 20 or more stanzas called *paurī*-s, or “step,” in which the *saloks* function as a *narrative recitative* in the performance of heroic ballads. *Vāran* are set to rāgas and therefore included in the related musical chapters. To Gurū Nānak are attributed three *vāran* (in *rāga Mājh*, *Āsā*, and *Malār*); to Gurū Amar Dās, four ballads (in *rāga Gujīrī*, *Sūhī*, *Ramkalī*, *Marū*); and to Gurū Rām Dās, eight *vāran* (in *Srī rāga*, *Gaurī*, *Bihāgrā*, *Vaḍhaṅs*, *Sorath*, *Bilāval*, *Sārang*, and *Kanṛā*); and Gurū Arjan composed six *vāran* (in *rāga Gaurī*, *Gujīrī*, *Jaitsrī*, *Ramkalī*, *Marū*, and *Basant*). Additionally, nine of these *vāran* also present the indication of a specific *dhunī* (tune) in which the ballad was supposed to be sung. As an example, the heading of the *vār* in *rāga Mājh* (GGS: 187) attributed to Gurū Nānak, reads that this ballad was to be sung to the same tune (*dhunī*) of the ballad narrating the story of Malik Murīd and Chandrahārā Sohā. It is unfortunate that while the melodic framework

of the *rāgas* has been preserved in other songs, the aural memory of these original *dhunīs* seems to be completely lost.

Notably, whereas the headings of the poems are detailed, there are no specific indications about the melodic setting of the compositions, which were only passed on orally until the introduction of music notation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Alongside the *vāran* are other regional song-forms set to unique melodic frameworks that have been transmitted to this day. Some of these are performed only on specific occasions. Among these are the *ghoriān* in *rāga* *Vaḍhaṅs* and the *lāvān* in *rāga* *Sūhī*, both composed by Gurū Rām Dās for the *Ānand Kāraj* (*dī kīrtan*), the wedding ceremony, also formalized by the fourth Gurū. Although there are *śabads* in *rāgas* suitable for death ceremonies (*Srī*, *Mārū*, *Mārū Kāfī*, *Vaḍahaṅs*, *Soraṭh*, *Tilaṅg*, *Tilaṅg Kāfī*, *Jaijāvantī*), since the time of Gurū Nānak, *alāhuniān* were known as the mourning songs for the *Akāl dī kīrtan*. Almost forgotten by *kīrtaniyās* of the modern era, *alāhuniān* is composed of a set of five chants by Gurū Nānak in *rāga* *Vaḍhaṅs* (GGS, 578), except the third, which is in *Vaḍhaṅs Dakhṇī* (Singh B. 2019).

Among the song-forms preserved in the Sikh Scripture, *partāl* has a unique place, with a structure that combines diverse rhythmic cycles within one composition. In the GGS there are only 55 *śabads*, in 13 different *rāgas*, that carry the *partāl* designation. These compositions are attributed to the fourth and fifth Sikh Gurūs, which not only is a significant marker in the history of Gurbāṇī *kīrtan* but also suggests that this song-form may be an original contribution of Gurū Rām Dās and Gurū Arjan's.

In some cases, additional indications appear in the headings of the hymns, right after the name of the genre (like: *Rāg Vaḍhaṅs M 1 Ghar 5 Alāhuniā*), but their meaning is still debated. For instance, one of the most obscure words is the term *ghar*, as given in the example previously. Scholars and practitioners have formulated contrasting interpretations when the term – that literally means “house” – is applied to the field of sung poetry. Bhāī Kāhn Singh Nābhā maintained that *ghar* has a twofold meaning. One is *tāl* (rhythmic) and the other is *sva* (note), a term that indicates “various types of singing of a *rāg*” (2008 [1930]: 1120). In the GGS, *ghars* are numbered from 1 to 17, which according to Nābhā's interpretation “gives an indication to the singer that a particular hymn has to be sung according to a specific *ghar* of a *rag*” (Ibid.). Nābhā seems to favor the idea of *ghar* as a melodic elaboration (*sva*prastar) of the *rāga*. To this day, though, scholars and practitioners are still divided between those who interpret the *ghar*'s heading as designating a type of rhythmic cycle (Singh G. 2011; Singh 2008) and others who view *ghar* as a term indicating styles of singing (Singh B. 2011; Kaur 2011). There is however neither written nor oral evidence that support either interpretation because the memory and practice of *ghar* has not been carried into the modern era.

Singing in (Conventional) Time

According to Indian music theory, each *rāga* carries extramusical associations with codified emotional states or *rasas*. In the Sikh scripture, the presence of *rāgas* that evoke devotion, and equipoise (*sahaj*), leads scholars to believe that “the Gurūs laid great emphasis on the performance of those *rāgas* that produced a balanced effect on the minds of both listeners and performers” (Singh P. 2019). Each *rāga*, with its distinct “color” and feeling, is traditionally associated with an appropriate time of the day (and night) or with a season. This conventional bond between *rāga*, *rasa*, and time of singing seems to apply also the Sikh scriptural hymns, in relation to the meaning of the *śabad*. For instance, in hymns mentioning the blooming of nature is noted a meaningful mutualism between the description of the spring and the musical setting to *rāga* *Basant*, a spring *rāga*. Similarly, *śabads* that refer to the monsoon are often set to *rāgas*, like *Malār*, associated with that season. However, in the context of devotional poetry, time and seasons are also a metaphor for conveying *gyān* (insight)

and inspiring *dhyān* (state of contemplation). Therefore, the imagery of spring can also refer to an inner state of awakening, and the rainy season to the showering of the Gurū's blessing.

In the past, the norm to perform a rāga according to a predefined time/season was arguably stricter than today's practice. To be able to sing a certain śabad at a different time than the one conventionally associated with the rāga indicated in the scripture, it came into practice to change the melodic setting into that of a rāga suitable for the specific moment of the performance. In congregational singing and in modern arrangements, the rāga-time association is disregarded. It is, instead, particularly relevant in the formal kīrtan sessions called *chaunkīs* (sittings) that were institutionalized by the fifth Gurū at the Śrī Harmandir Sāhib, in Amritsar, the main shrine also commonly known as the Golden Temple (Figure 2). These developed from the *chār chaukiān*, "the four sessions" that Bhāī Kāhn Singh Nābhā (1930) describes as (1) *Āsā dī Vār* in the early morning; (2) the *Charan Kamal*, in rāg Bilāval in the morning; (3) *So Dar* and *Rahrās* at sunset; and (4) *Kalyān* after sunset. These four *chaunkīs* originated from the morning and evening liturgical practices introduced by Gurū Nānak, and established by his successor, Gurū Angad. As mentioned by Bhāī Gurdās (Vār 1, Pauṛī 38), these are the recitation of the Japī in the time of the dawn (*amrit vēlē*) and the singing of *So Dar* and *Artī* in the evening. According to some scholars (Singh P. 2011; Singh 2014), the kīrtan *chaunkīs* that the fifth Gurū established in the seventeenth century at the Golden Temple were eight, and they were modeled on the eight liturgical sessions (*aśṭhyama*) practiced in the Vaiṣṇava temples, as follows:

- 1 Āsā dī Vār dī chaunkī (early morning)
- 2 Bilāval dī chaunkī (after sunrise)
- 3 Ānand dī chaunkī (before noon)
- 4 Sāraṅg dī chaunkī (noon)
- 5 Charan kamal dī chaunkī (after noon)
- 6 So Dar dī chaunkī (sunset)
- 7 Artī/Kalyān dī chaunkī (night)
- 8 Kīrtan sohilā dī chaunkī (late night)

Out of these eight *chaunkīs*, five are considered "permanent sessions," and at the end of each, the *ardās* (prayer) is recited followed by the distribution of the *karah praśad* to the attendees. Along with these eight timeslots, seasonal rāgas (and their variants) like Basant in the spring, and Malār during the monsoon months, can be sung at any time of the day. In the early twentieth century, the number of *chaunkīs* performed at the Śrī Harmandir Sāhib extended up to 15 a day, during which the continuous singing of the *bāṇī* symbolizes the omnipresence of the Akāl Purakh (Singh P. 2011). Despite the increased number of institutionalized kīrtan sittings, after Partition the repertory of the *chaunkīs* went through significant changes, and the performance of the śabads according to the appropriate rāga prescribed for each session became feebler.

Kīrtan Types

Kīrtan sessions at the Śrī Harmandir Sāhib, and at main gurdwārās, are rendered by specialized "temple musicians," in "solo" performances that until pre-Partition era were organized following a standard sequence of pieces. The sitting began with the accompanists playing a *śān*, an instrumental introduction in which the percussion played accompanied by a string instrument. After the *śān*, the lead kīrtaniyā unfolded the rāga by singing on a free rhythm a *mangalacharan* on auspicious ("mangal") verses from the GGS. After the *mangalacharan*, either a *partāl* or a *dhrupad* in *vaḍḍe tālas* (long slow-paced rhythmic cycles) was sung. The progression ended with *dharnās*, tunes based on popular

melodic-poetic lines in which the congregation joined the temple musicians, singing along with them. Dharnā is particularly apt for mass singing, with the stanzas rendered by the lead kīrtaniyā and the “refrain” (the *rahāo*) sung by the sangat (Paintal 1978). While *śān*, *mangalacharan* and *vaḍḍe tālas* compositions are no longer remembered, according to Bhāi Baldeep Singh, the practice of dharnā continued, generating a new standard of kīrtan based on this *responsorial* form of singing.

Another type of kīrtan is the *joṭian*, a congregational practice that is said to trace back to Bābā Buddhā (1506–1631). From the root *joṭ* (lit. “pair, couple”) this is a group performance based on an *antiphonal* structure, with one line sung by one group and repeated by a second party (Nabhā 1930). *Joṭian dī kīrtan* is also practiced during processions like the *parbhāt pheri* (early morning circumambulations) and the *nagar kīrtans* (town processions held on special occasions). In the mid-twentieth century a new congregational form, based on the *joṭian dī kīrtan*, was popularized by the reformer and spiritual leader by Bhāi Randhir Singh (1878–1961). He gave the start to the *akhand* (lit. “unbroken”) kīrtan practice, based on long uninterrupted singing sessions, often lasting all night (the so-called *rainsabaī*). In the *akhand kīrtan*, verses of the GGS are sung according to a simple, monotonous, melodic structure generally on a binary rhythm accompanied by a *tablā* player and marked by idiophones (*chimtā*) played by the sangat. *Samāgams* (gatherings) organized by the Akhand Kīrtanī Jathā (AKJ) have gained a popular appeal in India and abroad, for the intense chanting practice that seems to induce a trans-like state in the participants.

The Transmission of the Musical Knowledge

With the completion of the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib, the compilation of the scripture indexed by rāgas, and the institution of the *chaunkīs*, came the formalized institution of “temple musicians,” namely, the *rabābīs* and *rāgīs*, who were specialized in the service and the rāga-based rendition of the hymns. Notably, the first ones belonged to a rank of Muslim musicians that traced back to Bhāi Mardānā, the *rabāb* player who accompanied Gurū Nānak’s in his singing and *udasis* (journeys). The *rāgīs* (rāga experts) was a new class of kīrtan singers hailing from the Sikh *Panth*.

Both *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* acquired the status of specialized “temple servants” and played a role in preserving the *puratan śabad rīts*, the heritage musical compositions from the time of the Sikh gurūs. Even if the memory of illustrious kīrtaniyās has been transmitted in oral accounts, and more recently in written sources, *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* never constituted proper *gharānās* – or formalized musical styles associated with a particular lineage – as in the *darbārī* court music (Neuman 1980). Gurbānī kīrtan’s repertory is a *panthic* heritage belonging to the community and is not restrained to any particular person or family lineage. Bhāi Gurcharan Singh (1915–2017) and Bhāi Avtar Singh (1925–2006), sons of the legendary kīrtaniya Bhāi Jwala Singh, affirmed that there existed only one “school” of kīrtaniyās, which is Gurū Nanak’s *dharamsāl*, founded in 1521 when the first Gurū established the earliest Sikh community at Kartarpur. According to Bhāi Baldeep Singh, per instruction of the tenth and last Gurū, Gurū Gobind Singh, in 1709, Bhāi Dharam Singh instituted two centers of education: the *Girvaṛī* and *Sekhwān taksāls*. The lineage of learning of these two schools has been lost, but the term *taksāl* (lit. *mint, imprint*) was reintroduced in the late twentieth century to designate musical styles developed after Partition time. Gurnam Singh (2009) identified at least 26 *taksāls* that he named after places of worship or venues associated with renowned kīrtaniyās of the past and of the present. There is no historical evidence, however, to support this information, and the acknowledgement of distinguished *taksāls* seems to be modeled on the notion of *gharānā*, in order to align the Gur-Sikh tradition to the national paradigm and make sense of new styles that emerged after Partition time. Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains that only a few streams of Guru Nanak’s *dharamsāl* survived to pre-Partition time and – albeit individual styles – the knowledge of the repertory was

consistent throughout the old-generation kīrtaniyās. Differences in the renditions of the traditional repertory, as well as the creation of newly composed śabads based on modern Hindustani music, is a process that began in the late nineteenth century with the rise of Sikh reformist movements and escalated in the post-Independence era. At the dawn of independence from the British rule, identity politics – which fueled the notion of “purity” across the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh intelligentsia – also had a strong influence on the canonization of music traditions, resulting in a “sanitation” of those elements deemed spurious. Since the 1890s, there has been a thrust in promoting Sikh-led musicological scholarship and education, which has progressively disempowered the (Muslim) rabābīs from their role as custodians and performers of the centuries-old kīrtan compositions, until they were officially banned from doing kīrtan at the gurdwārās in 1925. These internal reforms translated into the creation of schools (*vidyālayās*) for baptized Sikhs, attached to the gurdwārās and managed by a central Sikh governance. This was the time the first books with notations of the śabads appeared and with them a reformed vocabulary with the introduction of new expressions, such as *Gurmat sangīt* (lit. “the music of the Gurū’s wisdom”). *Gurmat sangīt* designates in fact a new chapter of the modern history of kīrtan, in which new repertory was introduced, while the rabābīs’ tradition disappeared. The contribution of the rabābīs was revalued only in the late twentieth century, through extensive documentation on the last living exponents. Among these, Bhāi Ghulam Mohammed Chand enjoyed a late fame, and his death in 2015 signaled the end of a tradition that had begun with Bhāi Mardānā. Notably, a comprehensive collection of the rabābīs’ repertory was gathered by the *Namdhari*s’ sect, whose spiritual leaders were not only appreciative of the *purāṭan* repertory and skilled kīrtaniyās but promoted the practice of the scriptural hymns with the accompaniment of traditional string and percussion instruments.

The Tangible Heritage: Instruments

The musical instruments represent the tangible, material counterpart of the Sikh cultural heritage that, like the orally transmitted knowledge, is in danger of disappearing. There have been attempts, since the 1990s, to reconstruct the shape of musical instruments that have not been in use since the pre-Partition era. The paucity of written and oral information about these instruments generates, however, strong disagreements among scholars.

There are four main instruments (*taṁti sāz*) associated with the Sikh gurūs, and among these, the first one to appear since early Sikh history is the *rabāb*. There are no accounts of Gurū Nānak playing this instrument, but in iconographic and oral sources the rabāb is always associated with Bhāi Mardānā, the lifelong friend and accompanist of the Sikh faith’s founder. An instrument carrying the same name is known from the Middle East to Central Asia, but the rabāb used in the Sikh culture has unique features which distinguished it. Gurnam Singh introduced the term *Firandīya rabāb* to indicate that Bhāi Firandā supposedly presented this instrument to Bhāi Mardānā. Whereas according to Bhāi Baldeep Singh (the first Sikh scholar who has revived the instrument), Bhāi Mardānā played a *dhrupadī rabāb*, which was “used from Punjab to Bengal for different styles of kīrtan in various languages and religious traditions” (Singh 2004). This rabāb is a plucked chordophone, a fretless lute with a long neck and six gut or silk strings, attached to a round-shaped resonator, covered by goat skin. Another string instrument that was known for the accompaniment of Gurbānī kīrtan is the *sarandā*. Historically associated with the third Gurū, Amar Dās, this is a three-string fiddle with an hourglass-shaped resonator, covered with a skin. To Gurū Arjan, the fifth Gurū, is attributed the creation of the *joṛī-pakhāwaj*, a pair of drums derived from the medieval *mridangam*, with its distinct playing technique, and a repertory of rhythmic compositions unique to the *Amritsarī bāj* (Singh B. 2019). The rabāb (Figure 3), the sarandā (Figure 4), and the joṛī-pakhāwaj (Figure 5), although

reshaped under the instructions of the Sikh Gurūs, can be considered variants of instruments already existing in other traditions, whereas the *tāūs* (Figure 6) is an original contribution of the sixth Sikh Gurū, Hargobind (1595–1644) and has remained unique to Sikh culture. This instrument – with the voice and shape of a peacock (*tāūs* in Urdu) – is a fretted instrument with four (or five) melodic strings and 15 sympathetic strings, played with a bow. Like the *rabāb* and the *sarandā*, the *tāūs* was used to accompany the *kīrtan* singers, providing a continuous drone. Having almost disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century, these instruments have been replaced by the harmonium and the *tablā*, for melodic and rhythmic accompaniment respectively. Also available in electronic versions, the *harmonium* and *tablā* became a staple of the twenty-first century *śabad kīrtan*.

Sikh Musicology

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 dramatically affected the life of the Sikh communities across South Asia, with the dispersion of peoples and their intangible heritage. In the post-Partition era, the assimilative force of national policies, which concurred to fabricate a pan-Indian identity, entailed in turn an *epistemicide* of traditional knowledges. In music, this occurred through the institution of a centralized system of education that has established a singular narrative of Indian music history and reshaped centuries-old traditions, according to twentieth-century stereotypes of “classical,” devotional, and folk music. In this new context, film and pop music, particularly, became the cohesive tool that bonded people into one nation beyond their language, religious, and cultural barriers (Morcom 2015; Sarrazin 2008). By the 1960s, the aesthetic canons of Bollywood music and Indian “*cassette culture*” (Manuel 1993) were adopted also in the composition of new *kīrtan* songs. As the renowned *kīrtaniyā* Bhāi Gurcharan Singh recalled (2008), old-generation *rāgis*, disempowered in their role of custodians of *purātan śabad rīts*, were forced by the management of the *gurdwārās* to simplify their repertory to make it more appealing to the *sangat*. In response to the decline of the traditional forms of *kīrtan*, a renewed interest in the performance of *rāga*-based *śabads* sparked in Punjab around the end of the 1980s. This revival, however, took divergent approaches. On the one hand, it brought the creation of newly-composed (or *neo-traditional*) *rāga*-based songs, inspired by the twentieth-century *khyāl* (Hindustani “classical” music). This approach is supported by the misconception that any *śabad* set to a *rāga* is necessarily derived from a “classical” art-form. On the other hand, the so-called *Sikh Renaissance* is fostering the recovery of the existing body of *rāga*-based heritage compositions (the actual *purātan śabad rīts*) and their pedagogy which have survived in oral and written forms.

An underestimated issue is the generational void between the *kīrtaniyās* (*rāgīs* and *rabābīs*) active before the Partition and those who – growing up after 1947 – were trained in “schools” according to the modern Hindustani system, which, paradoxically, became the paradigm for newly composed repertories of *śabad kīrtan*.

One of the earliest initiatives to “revive” the performance of *rāga*-based *kīrtan* was taken in 1991 by a religious figure, Sant Baba Suchā Singh of Jawaddī (Ludhiana). With a desire to determine the “definite shape” of the 31 *rāgas* and their variants indicated in the GGS, Suchā Singh gathered a *Rāg Nirnayak Committee*, composed of renowned musicians, *kīrtaniyās*, and scholars who had the task to discuss and “finalize” the melodic outlines of the *rāgas*, with particular reference to those deemed as “forgotten.” This committee introduced (and in some cases created) normative standards of the *rāga* forms, which to this day work as guidelines for the composition of “neo” *kīrtan* repertory. An offspring of the Jawaddī conference is the first Gurmat Sangīt Chair established in 2003 at the Punjabi University of Patiala for “the promotion, propagation and preservation of Gurmat Sangeet as a school of music” (PUP). Funded with the financial support of a private institution (the Sri

Gurū Giān Parkash Foundation), since 2005 the Chair also runs a teaching Department of Gurmat Sangīt, which has introduced Sikh musicology as a new discipline in the university system. Until 2019, the Chair was under the leadership of Gurnam Singh, a student of Prof. Tārā Singh, who was a renowned scholar of the post-Partition era. Tārā Singh has been a prolific writer and composer of neo traditional śābads who, like his disciples, envisioned the teaching of Gurmat Sangīt in a state-led institution, reserved until then only for the dissemination of Hindustani classical music. Unlike the Gurmat Sangīt vidyālayās, in which students are only young men destined to a career as rāgīs and kīrtan accompanists, the courses at PUP are open to both girls and boys aiming to earn a university degree in Gurmat Sangīt, taught according to the pedagogy and the styles of performance adopted from the modern national system of music. On this note, a critique is voiced by Bhāi Baldeep Singh, who pinpointed the distinction between this *neo-colonial* Gurmat Sangīt school (which emerged in the twentieth century), and the *uncolonized paramparā* (tradition), indicating with this expression the tradition that has preserved the memory of Gurbānī sangīt as an entire ecosystem of knowledges predating the impact of colonial modernity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork within and outside the Gurbānī traditions, since the late 1980s, Bhāi Baldeep Singh's pivotal work focuses on the reconstitution of the tangible and intangible assets of the Gurbānī sangīt, through a comprehensive approach to musical knowledges ranging from organology to musicology. Bhāi Baldeep Singh – who coined the expression “*Sikh Renaissance*” to indicate the resurgence of this *ecology of knowledges* – belongs to a renowned family of kīrtaniyās tracing back to the time of the third Gurū. His great granduncles, the two brothers Bhāi Avtar Singh and Bhāi Gurcharan Singh, in the late 1960s, were recognized as the only kīrtaniyās who had preserved the original compositions from the times of the Sikh Gurūs.

Albeit the different orientations that distinguish the exponents of the *uncolonized* Gurbānī sangīt from the *neo-colonial* Gurmat sangīt's revivalists, their works generated a new wave of interest in the repertoires and the history of śābad kīrtan among Sikh communities and Western scholars. Information and archival recordings now circulate on web platforms and social media, although not supported by a critical assessment of these materials. To advance research and take the discussion onto international academic ground, only recently Sikh musicology was introduced in the Western hemisphere, as a new discipline that studies Sikh musical practices from an ethnomusicological lens. Established at Hofstra University (New York), the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh musicology is the first of its kind in Western academia. Active since 2011, this Chair is an endowment of Dr. Hakam Singh (1928–2020), a renowned member of the Sikh community in the USA, a scholar, and a kīrtaniyā himself. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair, currently held by the author, engages ethnomusicological research with Sikh studies scholarship, contributing in this way to reestablishing the legitimate place of Sikh heritage in the history of South Asian music, while introducing the study of the music literature as a component of Sikh studies.

New modes of aurality keep the tradition of singing the scriptural hymns thriving. It is, at the same time, necessary to recognize and preserve the repertoires that carry the memory and the sound of Sikh culture into the future. To this end, Sikh Musicology serves as an academic avenue to foster a critical appreciation of the “Sikh world” through its tangible and intangible heritage.

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THE FIVE ESSENTIALS OF SIKH ART

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

From a relatively neglected area, Sikh art has recently been gaining enormous attention. The tercentenary celebrations of the founding of the Khalsa in 1999 generated a number of exhibitions, conferences, and elegant volumes, which were followed up with gusto for the fourth centennial of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in 2004 and the 550th birth celebrations of Guru Nanak in 2019. Beautiful illustrations of the ten Gurus, scriptural manuscripts, jewelry, coins, weapons, sculptures, textiles, and objects in gold, silver, copper in all their regional and stylistic variations are being displayed in galleries worldwide. To showcase their heritage, Sikh patrons have established permanent galleries – for instance the Kapany Gallery of Sikh Art at AAM in San Francisco, the Khanuja Sikh Art Gallery at Phoenix Art Museum. Art “for the Sikhs, by the Sikhs, and about the Sikhs” is being vigorously promoted through conferences, lectures, webinars, performances, and scholarly publications (Brown 1999: 17). Contemporary artists are making innovative contributions from their global perspective. And there is a rapid increase of ardent admirers, collectors, and preservers of the art and artifacts of the Sikhs. Indeed Sikh art is at an exciting momentum.

The source of this excitement is Guru Nanak’s revelation of unicity *ikk aon kar*, One Being (XX). Not a homogenization by any means, Nanakian unicity is the singular transcendent Being informing the uniqueness of all beings biotic or abiotic in this multiverse. While the One itself remains aniconic (Guru Nanak categorically said, “*thapia na jae* – cannot be shaped,” GGS: 1), the rhythmic unicity sustained by his numeral 1, the syllabic *aon*, and the unending geometric arc inspires innovative art works in multiple mediums.

The first Sikh Guru’s unicity is the model for the 1430–paged *Guru Granth Sahib* harmoniously holding together diverse genres of literary compositions by Sikh Gurus, Hindu bhagats, and Sufi saints in diverse musical frameworks from across the Indian subcontinent. Nanakian unicity glows in the earliest expressions of Sikh art, the illuminated and illustrated manuscripts of the GGS. During the regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh gold began to be used extensively in the writing and illumination of texts, literally called “*sunehri beeds*” or “golden volumes,” so professional book illuminators (*muzahhibs*) of Arabic and Persian manuscripts were employed, and the Persian sunburst (*shamsa*), the divine light (*nur* of the holy Quran), and the highly ornate Islamicate blue and gold lettering (*unwan*) started to filter through Sikh sacred volumes – their unending geometric patterns and luminosity but reiterate Guru Nanak’s infinite One (Deol 2003: 50–67). Nanakian unicity is the blueprint for Harmandir, the archetypal Sikh architectural structure; its four doors welcome the

traditionally four segregated castes as equal (*eko dharam*). The five adornments of the Khalsa worn by men and women are patterned on Nanakian unicity (NGK Singh 2005: 97–137). The ubiquitous *ikk oan kar* decorating jewelry, clothes, homes, gateways, shops, and shrines is a direct configuration of Nanakian unicity. The founder Guru's metaphysical imagination is essential to Sikh art, architecture, literature, portraiture, music, and crafts.

So is his physical image! Soon after his passing away stories or testimonies (*sakhis*) about Guru Nanak's birth and life (*janam*) began to circulate orally, in writing, and in paintings. Their dominant motif is not chronological or geographical facts; rather, it is the living memory of the person of Guru Nanak and his message. Many of the stories set up a stage for interpreting his theological and moral teachings, interlacing his biography with his sublime lyrics recorded in the GGS. Patrons from Sikh centers in the Panjab and beyond commissioned local writers and artists, and consequently numerous Janamsakhis were produced in different regions at different periods that have come down in a variety of renditions, including the Bala, Miharban, Adi, and Puratan. The earliest extant illustrated Janamsakhis listed are the Bala with 27 illustrations dated to 1658, the Bagharian with 42 illustrations dated to 1724, and the B40 with 57 paintings, dated 1733 (McLeod 1991: 5–6). They are followed by many others, including the set done by the Nainsukh family of artists in Guler at the Government Museum in Chandigarh and the Kapany Unbound Set at the AAM. Thus, we see Guru Nanak depicted in Guler and Kangra styles of Northern India, just as in the Eastern Mughal style or Southern Deccani styles. One of the earliest, the B40 housed at the British Library in London, has important documentation. Along with the date, two notes attached to the manuscript identify Alam Chand Raj as the artist, Daia Ram Baol as the scribe, Sangu Mal as the patron. While art historians greatly admire the paintings from the Nainsukh family, the style of the B40 has not received much praise.

For me the B40 set of paintings is a spectacular symbiosis of Alam Chand Raj's artistic talent, his strong rural impulse, and his nuanced understanding of Guru Nanak's unicity. The "Raj" caste of masons and bricklayers, along with the sub-caste of Tarkhans (carpenters), have made distinctive contributions to Sikh art and architecture, including Queen Victoria's Durbar Room at Osborne House designed by Bhai Ram Singh. Alam Chand's brushstrokes exhibit his artistic ancestry, and the fusion of folk art from the Rajasthani Malwa school with the imaginative Chaurapanchashika style of Jain and Hindu manuscript illustrations further adds to the charm of his paintings. The events he chooses to paint are remarkably sophisticated and progressive, for instance Guru Nanak's meeting with a cross-dressed Sufi saint (# 50) or showing his bruises to his successor Angad (#56) (NGK Singh 2013). In a symphony of colors and compositional elements, the B40 paintings brilliantly depict Guru Nanak's sensuous feel for the aniconic One, his interior and exterior journeys, his manifold interfaith conversations, his environmental aesthetics, his marvelous actions. These 57 illustrations demonstrate a distinctively "Sikh" style and iconography that question W.H. McLeod's thesis: "It cannot be affirmed that the style or the iconography is uniquely Sikh. The debt to Sufi patterns is too marked to permit any such claims" (McLeod 1991: 7).

Of course we find Sufi motifs in the B40 – along with Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and others – for these were a part of the cultural landscape, and the artist uses them effectively to illustrate Guru Nanak's pluralistic personality and his all-inclusive philosophy open to Islam. But the "debt to Sufi patterns is too marked" goes too far. There is no indication of Guru Nanak's affiliation with in any Sufi khanaqah. We do not see him performing Sufi practices nor carrying Sufi icons like the wine cup for mystical inebriation, Sufi beggar bowl *kashkul*, meditation stick for propping up arms during long Sufi vigils, flag symbolizing Sufi way to the heaven (Ellsal 2019: 243–259). Even books, the Sufi trope of knowledge and spiritual wisdom, are absent in Alam's iconography of the Sikh Guru; instead, his set opens with little Nanak tightly holding on to his writing board (#1). There are no

thrilling scenes of the Guru like those of the Sufis displayed in museums internationally: a Sufi riding a leopard (Sackler, Washington DC), a Sufi walking with a lion (Met, NYC), a Sufi calmly sitting beside a gentle tiger and lion (Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin), or dervishes dancing ecstatically (Bodleian Library, Oxford), etc. The early B40 visuals confirm that the artist Alam Chand Raj is working in a new style and iconography that is uniquely “sikh”; each frame presents the “original,” as literary critic Hans Georg Gadamer would say, “more fully, more genuinely, just as it truly is” (Gadamer 1989: 154). In their dramatically simple and vibrant language of colors, we retrieve five essentials of Sikh art:

- 1 New “sikh” identity
- 2 Biophilial existentiality
- 3 Pluralistic iconography
- 4 Wondrous *khushi*
- 5 Transcendent materiality

1 New “sikh” Identity

Alam Chand’s choice to begin his set with the scene of little Nanak’s first day at school, introduces a new “sikh” aesthetic (Figure 27.1). The Panjabi text opens with millions of gods, heroes, and heroines paying homage to the newly born Nanak – a scene lavishly illustrated by other artists including the prominent twentieth-century artist Sir Sobha Singh. Actually Alam Chand’s selection is a keener depiction of Guru Nanak’s inaugural role. Derived from Sanskrit *shisya*, Pali *sekka*, the word *sikh* refers to a learner, a seeker, a person in quest, and the school space designed for writing, reading, *questioning*, interpreting, reflecting, perfectly sets the stage for the “first” Sikh. He is reverently holding a writing board in his hands of the sort (*takhti or pati*) used by children till recent times. A dignified Nanak foreshadows the Gurmukhi script and Sikh scripture. Parallel to the Arabic script for the holy Quran and Sanskrit for the sacred Vedas, Gurmukhi would be the script for recording his intimacy with the transcendent One. Most of the 35 stanzas of his acrostic “Pati Likhi” begin with a letter of the Gurmukhi alphabet (GGS) in the very form that they are in use today. The writing board is a metonymic marker that its holder would write up a new aesthetics.

This popular scene is illustrated in by many different artists. After the collapse of Mughal sovereignty in Delhi and Awadh, dispersed artists took up Sikh paintings from the lens of their respective religious and cultural traditions. The stories they chose to paint also depended upon their personal interest, and much was contingent on their individual talent. Yet as we see in Figures 27.1, 27.2, 27.3, and 27.4, there is a remarkable similarity amongst them. It turns out templates were in circulation. Recently a creased sheet was discovered that has thumbnail sketches of 74 events in Guru Nanak’s life, with each episode identified in brief Persian and Gurmukhi inscriptions (Goswamy and Smith 2006: 36–37). In rich variations the B40, the Bagharian, the Kapany, and the V&A depict the same scene.

Interestingly, even in the interior school scene of the B40, the artist’s mason ancestry shows up as we get a glimpse of the townscape with its architectural buildings beyond the school walls. On the right side of the frame stands Nanak wearing a yellow full-sleeved robe coming down to his ankles with an elegant reddish sash neatly tied around his waist and a matching turban over his head. The *chooridar* (literally “bracelet forming”) tight trousers peep out from below his robe, as do his curly locks from the turban on either side of his face. It is a most endearing portrait. Nanak’s formal dress and upright demeanor are markedly different from the rest of the children, some of whom are meagerly dressed and most of whom are romping around. His uniqueness (*avar disat*) written in the



Figure 27.1 Baba Nanak Goes to School.

© British Library Board Panjabi MS B40, f. 3

Janamsakhi (B40: 34) is visually sketched out. The turban customarily donned by Mughal princes, Sufi saints, and Rajput nobility imparts young Nanak a maturity beyond his years. He confidently greets his mustached teacher dressed in the typical upper-caste Brahmin outfit of a pleated dhoti tucked around his waist with one end draping from his right shoulder down his bare chest. Caught at the liminal threshold between “home” and “society” – with his father standing behind him and his teacher seated on a pedestal across from him, with food and books – little Nanak displays profound dignity.

The Bagharian and the Kapany versions are more stylized and more urbane in their iconographic representations. Whereas the B40 teacher is bare-chested and dhoti wrapped, here he is fully robed in the Islamicate manner, and his backdrop is much more elaborate. In the Bagharian scene the



Figure 27.2 Guru Nanak at School.

Gift of the Kapany Collection, 1998.58.2

Asian Arts Museum, San Francisco

teacher has a full round beard, and he rests against a large round pillow like Sufi saints or Mughal royalty. Likewise, in the Kapany Set, the teacher without beard or mustache is being fanned by an attendant – again, a sign of his high status. In both instances a curtain is neatly rolled up above the teacher in the doorway behind him and the wall is decorated with angular floral designs. Alam Chand's lively townscape, fruit trees, and birds are not visible. In the Kapany Set, Nanak even has a halo symbolizing his divinity and a plume in his turban for his sovereignty. In all three renditions, the teacher is seated on a platform, more or less in the same position, and his hands gesture a warm welcome to his new pupil: somebody special is entering his horizon.



Figure 27.3 Baba Nanak Goes to School. Bagharian Manuscript.

© Roopinder Singh, *Guru Nanak: His Life and Teachings*
New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 2004

The elegant V&A painting from Lahore is executed in a highly sophisticated Mughal style (dated 1800–1810). It depicts two scenes and differs considerably from the others. In the foreground occupying majority of the space, Nanak has just made his entry; the reduced space above right depicts his departure giving the perspective of geographical and temporal distance. Young Nanak is in a yellow robe (like the B40), but his charming curls are not visible. In the foreground scene he is bowing to his teacher, his elbow to his hands forms a mesmerizing semicircular rhythm. The teacher's left hand reaches out to greet his new pupil, while the father's right hand caresses Nanak's back, as though to move him forward. The artist creates a sinuous tactile movement. Unlike the other settings where



Figure 27.4 Baba Nanak Goes to School.

©Victoria and Albert Museum, From the collection of P.C. Manuk and Miss G.M. Coles

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69364/painting-unknown/>

the students are all in the foreground, here four are seated behind their well-groomed teacher. The students are older and are primarily sitting with their books – not writing boards. Except for the B40 where there appear to be a dozen or more, we find eight students in the various renditions (proves the use of templates?). The V&A even catches an amusing moment of a naughty student being punished: in a cockerel position, his arms are looped around his legs as he holds his ears. What a contrast to the stately Nanak!

The mainstream classroom instruction is soon reversed, which is captured in Guru Nanak's departure in the abbreviated scene on the above right of the V&A composition. With his writing board tightly gripped under his right arm, Nanak is walking away, his father behind him. As the B40 Panjabi text goes on to recount, the next day when his new student does not show interest in his studies, the teacher confronts Nanak. Fed up with the customary instructions and pedagogies, the youngster recites his composition (recorded in the GGS:16). Stanza by stanza, the student ends up teaching his teacher, offering an illuminating analysis of his scriptural verse. Discarding traditional epistemes, the new pupil proposes a pen of love and a smooth mind to write upon – so smooth that it has no prejudiced scratches. Then the pen of love is held in the hand, dipped into ink of pulverized egoistic lust, and awareness as the agent takes up the writing.

The singular Janamsakhi scene captures the lengthy literary narrative as it showcases the fundamental "Sikh" identity introduced by young Nanak: (1) writing, (2) *questioning*, and (3) loving the divine One. The painting evokes Guru Nanak's unicity verbally expressed by him: "You are the writing board, You are the pen, You are the writing on the board" (GGS: 1291). The infinite One is ever present. With his writing board in hand, the youngster mandates an interrogative technique: "ask/question the guru (*guru puchhi*)" cited in the B40 text (35). The Guru is the medium for awakening the consciousness, and the class room environment is conducive to intellectual inquiry and emotional awareness. Unlike the Kierkegaardian tripartite hierarchical structure of religion, ethics, and aesthetics with aesthetics at the bottom rung, heightening of the experience (aesthetic) – at once intellectual, spiritual, and moral – is what the youngster Nanak elicits in the academic environment. On each of the B40 janamsakhi canvases, Nanak enters the classroom to raise questions. Rather than accept or parrot past instruction coming down the generations *lethargically*, the newcomer enters the school to think anew, to consider alternatives, challenge, and overturn conventional habits and attitudes – *to live an embodied spirituality* here and now. Aesthetics is also *Alethia*. Opposite of anesthesia, aesthetics is literally the heightening of faculties; opposite of *lethe* (oblivion), *alethia* is not forgetting. While he is respectful and polite (gesture of bowing in the V&A), Nanak's *puchh* – depicted in his departure, divergence from fellow students – is a quest for the meaning and purpose of things. "Books" belonging to the past are absent in the B40 set. (In later Janamsakhi paintings, Guru Nanak has been depicted with a book which is his *own* book of verse mentioned by Bhai Gurdas, Var I:32). The icon here is the writing board for young Nanak to write his new "sikh" aesthetics with pen of love. "What is represented comes into its own in the picture. It experiences an increase in being" (Gadamer 1989: 153).

2 Biophilial Existentiality

Over the course of the B40 paintings, Nanak grows from a little boy to a teenager to a dark bearded youth into the gray-bearded middle age and subsequently to a full white-bearded elderly man (*Baba*). He is clearly located within the latitudes and longitudes of this temporal world. Whether dark, gray, or white, his beard is spherical, and as it combines with his roundish turban, it renders an overall softness to his features. His physical growth validates the natural human body in sync with the natural cosmos. For the B40 artist icons of divinity and sovereignty like the halo or an attendant are superfluous.

Instead lush trees with succulent fruit and lively birds offer the Guru an organically majestic canopy. His two rosaries in his respective hands are marker of his power over negative forces (against the demon in # 8; against Bhola robber in # 9). Scenes of Gurus Nanak and Angad enjoying the fragrance of flowers is another mark of their spirituality. The B40 introduces Lahina (later Guru Angad) as he is marching with his companions to Durga temple. Hoisting a banner in one hand,

he holds a small flower in his right hand and is inhaling its fragrance (# 21). The image makes the ideological point that Lahina with his aesthetic sensitivity was the rightful heir to Guru Nanak. From another lengthy B40 narrative, Alam Chand chooses to focus on a 12-year-old Nanak enjoying the scent of a flower sitting up on a hillock amidst birds and plants (#39). His composition visually translates Guru Nanak's aesthetic approach, the integration of sensuous experience and cognitive knowledge: "only the enjoyer of fragrance recognizes the flower – *rasia hovai musk ka tab phul pachana*" (GGS: 725).

The artist also unwinds Guru Nanak's intense existential crisis. The Guru's peers were Siddhas, Naths, Yogis, Sufi saints, Hindu bhaktas, Buddhist monks, and Jain renunciates, most of whom practiced spirituality outside of marriage and household. How does a young fellow deconstruct centuries-old obsession with celibacy and renunciation? How does one shatter rigid social structures and hierarchies? Bhai Mardana's rabab lying still on the ground in the center of Alam Chand's frame (#18) iconographs a new existentiality incubating in Nanak's interstices. Kneeling beside is a dejected Mardana; his head is lowered, his hands are vacant, and his eyes are elegiacally cast on his horizontally flat instrument. Symmetrically behind the rabab stands Guru Nanak vertically positioned against dark gray skies, *quest*-ioning? Probing? Agonizing? There is no music in the air.

"The physician's visit" is another powerful illustration of Guru Nanak's existential crisis (#4). Surrounded by his family we see him all scrunched up. He is sitting on the floor in the interior world of his home, his lifeless left hand beside his left foot. Pictorially compartmentalized, the physician across attentively holds the young man's right wrist (very fair in contrast with his own) to diagnose his patient's fever-stricken body. And though a peacock struts on the roof, and birds and fruit enliven the landscape, Nanak is not in sync with the scene. If anything, its nocturnal slate blue backdrop spells out the darkness of his spirit. The angular architecture draws up chasms and segregations. The white pillar stands between Nanak and his mother, the threshold separates him from the doctor, and the orange wall with its elaborate molding cuts through the composition. The disjointed iconography discloses young Nanak's psychic breakup.

The janamsakhi serves as a frame for Guru Nanak's poetically charged verse quoted in the GGS: "the naïve physician does not know that the pain lies in the liver – *bhola vaidu na janai karak kaleje mahi*" (GGS: 1279). In Panjabi idiom, *kaleja* (liver) is the emotional, moral, and spiritual core of a person. Whereas the physician with his scientific training fails, the mother pictured with her chin up and confidently raised left hand sees through her son's conflict.¹ She recognizes her son's disease: his hankering is for the transcendent – who is not up above or beyond, to be accessed by the mind or disembodied soul, but rather is painfully felt in the recesses of his visceral organ so crucial to bodily functions.

The divine potential of the body is aesthetically confirmed in the numerous images of our well-groomed Guru. Even on his arduous journeys he is dressed in flowing robes, dons a delicately designed red-green-yellow turban, wears *jutti*-style shoes. Over and again, the B40 shows Guru Nanak as a total antithesis to Nath and Kanphat yogis with their split-ears and ash-smeared bodies or *langota*-wearing ascetics and other groups of renunciates with shaved heads or long unkempt hair. As a sign of "mastering" their sexuality or "death" of their body, ascetics from different religious traditions opted to wear little on their bodies, smeared themselves with ash, killed their hunger and desires. A dignified Guru so well-dressed and graceful in his gestures, visually expresses his existential message heard repeatedly in the B40 text "*nam* (Name) *dan* (charity) *ishnan* (bathing)," that translates into remembering the infinite One, living responsibly for the good of society, and cultivating the self with its five bodily faculties (smelling, hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting).

Vital to knowledge, morality, and spirituality, these five must be honed (*ishnan*) so they develop into "virtues" (*guna*): truth (*sai*), contentment (*santokh*), compassion (*daia*), righteousness (*dharam*),

and patience (*dhiraq*). Otherwise these very five degenerate into “vices” (*avaguna*): lust (*kam*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobhu*), attachment (*mohu*), and pride (*ahankara*). These “thieves,” as Guru Nanak frequently refers to negative human propensities in the GGS, are personified by Bhola dressed in sparkling white robes with matching pearl earrings in illustration # 9. Named “Bhola” (“innocent”), he is just the opposite! A highway robber, he robs innocent travelers of their intrinsic wealth. Coming down the hillock in his sparkling white robes, robber Bhola forces audiences to examine themselves whether their exterior self matches their deep interior.

The climax of Guru’s search is his entry into the palace of the formless One (#28), his revelation of the divine One in every bit of this material multiverse. This essential Nanakian aesthetic mode of being flashes across Alam Chand’s iconography as we hear birds chirping and rabab melodies soaring, see lovely multihued skies, taste mouthwatering fruits, feel the delicacy of grass, smell fragrant bushes and flowers. Alam Chand insightfully weaves together space and time to expose Guru Nanak’s biophilial existentiality. Landscapes and townscapes seamlessly merge to reveal simultaneity and multiplicity of relationships taking place in space. The interior walls of a house or a school open up to the world outside, the houses in the distance with their latticed windows evoke everyday patterns of life and living.

An intriguing composition depicts Guru Nanak conversing with Natha Siddhas at Achal. In the immediate foreground runs a horizontal road, along with a row of trees. Next there is a wall and on the other side a cityscape with the familiar houses, trees, and structures. Further still is a large well-constructed pool with ducks merrily paddling across its rippling waters. Beyond we see Baba Nanak conversing with four kanphat yogis. The scene is packed with religious conversations, spiritual music, swimming/bathing, and commercial dealings (B40 # 27)! Lotuses and lilies and gliding ducks between two Gulmohar trees in the very forefront of yet another frame (#17) showcase the paradigmatic mode of existence – to be engaged in various worldly activities while staying afloat, to stay free and in bloom, not sink or drown.

In vivid colors and stage settings the B40 brushstrokes dissolve all Cartesian dualisms sacred/secular, this-worldly/otherworldly, temporal/eternal. Its double frame at the end (#57) is the ideal conclusion. In the bottom are three yogis handing ashes to a young fellow, an attendant of Guru Nanak. Youth is the channel to communicate to the Guru about his final moments of embodiment. The attendant has luxurious curls similar to the young Nanak we first saw. In the upper plane, the Guru as usual is seated under the tree with Mardana playing the *rabab*. He prepares for his cremation in this final scene, an enigmatic replay of his preparation for school in the opening (#1). No eternity, no disembodied soul, no otherworld; in this life-affirming finale finite metaphysics sweeps into sensuous ontology. Mangoes and birds and flowers – everything around Guru Nanak is in vibrant motion. His own departure is an essential part of an ever-temporal biophilial existentiality.

3 Pluralistic Iconography

Pluralism at the heart of Nanakian narratives comes out alive in the B40 paintings. In most of the scenes he is with Muslim Mardana. The Sikh Guru has an Islamicate outfit, a Sufi-like turban, along with a seli woolen chord associated with Sufis. We see him travel to Islamic centers like Baghdad and Mecca, visit mosques and khanqas, converse with numerous Sufi saints like Rattan Haji, Sheikh Brahm, Sheikh Sharaf, Shah Abdul Rahman, Shah Rukn al Din (some who even preceded him). In his memorable encounter with Shah Abdul Rahman, the Sufi saint is dressed entirely in pink (B40, #7). As the narrative goes, when the Shaikh returns home, his disciple comments on his flushed body, and the saint’s response: “*ajju khudai ka lal milia* – today I met with Khuda’s ruby” (B40: 53–44). The polysemous term “*lal*” denotes the color red or radiance or ruby or a lover, so

the rosiness divulges the Muslim saint's infusion of Guru Nanak's spiritual radiance. Many such B40 visuals document a beautiful intimacy between the Sikh Guru and the mystical world of Islam.

But the essential pluralistic Nanakian spirit coloring this early Sikh pictorial set is not a lack of artistic originality; it cannot be construed as "too marked" a "debt to Sufi patterns." Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana have a deep personal friendship that goes way back to their childhood; it bears no resemblance with the key sheikh-disciple relationship of the Sufis. The Islamicate-dressed Guru also has the iconic Vaishnava tilak mark on his forehead. He attends a multitude of fairs and festivals at religious sites of diverse Hindu schools; he converses with Bhagat Kabir, Siddhas, Naths, Hindu gods, mythological figures, along with kings, noblemen, robbers, gardeners, enchantresses, etc. from different social and geographical backgrounds. Wherever Guru Nanak goes, whomever he meets, he promotes basic human values; he champions human rights, social equality, and gender justice – grounded in his distinct boundless unicity, beyond all either-or borders. Over and again Alam Chand artistically reveals Guru Nanak's unique earth-oriented metaphysics valuing temporality, beauty, pluralism, and relationships.

Guru Nanak's geographical journeys parallel his inner search. There is a curiosity in the seeker to know about the foreign and familiarize himself with the distant, the *other*. That it requires tremendous courage and initiative to enter into somebody else's ideological and geographical space is brought home in B40 # 20. Here we see a youthful dark-bearded yellow-robed Nanak approaching a conclave of Nath Siddhas sitting atop the legendary mount Sumer. While the group is securely seated in the silence of the mountain far from worldly concerns, Nanak with Bhai Mardana is standing on the edge of the mountain in a precarious locus. Pluralistic ventures are not easy by any means.

The architecture depicted in the B40 set of paintings is multiculturally and multireligiously rich. As our eyes travel from the Guru sitting on emerald green grass discoursing with diverse interlocutors to the wide architectural skyline blending harmoniously with thick foliage, the inner self expands. His panoramic vistas incite desire to meet residents of the different houses, of the multi-storied buildings with balconies, turrets, intricately latticed windows, sumptuously decorated walls in colorful arabesques. Illustration #29 offers a spectacular vista of an ornate garden and grounds extending behind a red sandstone city wall, the front of which features a monumental white gate reminiscent of the entry to the iconic Taj Mahal. A tall doorway in the shape of an arch rises from the center, with decorative dynamic motifs ornamenting both its sides. Flowers, leaves, and vines transparently interlace the white background. The beauty of these man-made designs in stone is only augmented by Mother Nature's splendid display of the flowering bushes and fruit-bearing trees in the background – among them, Ashoka trees, prized for their handsome foliage. In B40 #38 we get a glimpse of mosques, tombs, samadhs, and open-air pavilions. The vista of diverse architectural designs – typically Indian on the left, Islamicate on the right, and stupa-like East Asian in the middle – vibrantly illustrates the pluralistic impulse of Guru Nanak.

The icon of unicity, Guru Nanak, depicted in a plurality of stage settings, sings the glory of the all-inclusive aniconic One. He breaks conventional dress codes and models. His external markers "Muslim" or "Hindu" do not construct a "composite" or a "hybrid" model; rather, the motifs convincingly convey to the viewer a figure beyond the either/or religious categories prevalent in medieval India. The circular string of beads in his hand(s) in different sizes is his iconic marker. Is it *tasbeeh*? *rosary*? *threngwa*? *japa mala*? *tulsi mala*? *rudraksa mala*? Does it belong to Hindus? Muslims? Buddhists? Jains? Christians? Jews? In illustration #28, we can literally see numinous joy pouring out from Guru Nanak's fingers and palms touching the circle of stringed white beads as he stands in the palace of the formless One, a perfect translation of the B40 text, *nrinkar de mahal jae khara kita* (100). The circle in the center of Alam's composition sends the mind reeling into infinity. We see

no Being, and yet the sheer reverence with which Nanak's rosary reaches out to welcome evokes an awesome presence, offering Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish alike a glimpse of the variegated multiverse beaded upon the singular Strand.

4 Wondrous Khushi

The Janamsakhis were produced by the collective body of the Sikhs, and in its colophon the B40 spells out its function, purpose, and performance: "the gift of gifts is Name; rejoice . . . Rejoice! Move the tongue. Say *wahguru*" (B40:155). Occupying a key position in the self-consciousness of the Sikhs in this post-Guru period, the community in 1733 produced the B40 for their combined consumption and joy – to forge communal bonds and praise the divine One, to bring knowledge that would bloom in the heart. Its function is tersely expressed in the imperative "rejoice" (*khushi karni ji*)!

And the objective is accomplished splendidly. The overarching mood of the janamsakhis is reproduced in the delightful scenes of Guru Nanak choreographing his wondrous acts. Miracle performance was a common genre in medieval North Indian cultural landscape. Buddhist Jatakas and Puranic lore had been popular for centuries, and by the time janamsakhis came into circulation, Sufi orders had spread *mu'jizat* (miraculous stories) about Prophet Muhammad and *karamat* (supernatural performances) broadly throughout the Panjab. In Sufi literature, competition between Sufis and Yogis in performing miracles was a popular theme. Also prevalent were narratives of Muslim holy men competing in the performance of miracles with Hindu, Buddhist, shamanic, or Christian holy men (Green 2004: 222). The janamsakhi writers and artists were surely influenced by the narrative plots and artistic conventions of their multicultural milieu. However, we do not discern any specific borrowing. In fact, the underlying competitive spirit of Sufi literature is entirely missing. The mood of wondrous *khushi* prescribed in the B40 colophon prevails the numerous Nanakian miracles. He turns his feet and a mosque turns around. With a touch of his finger, he cools a monster's boiling cauldron of oil. With a small stick he shifts a huge boulder so five water springs burst forth to supply villagers in their water scarce area. By resting his eyes on the ground, pottery fragments and pebbles change into gold coins. By whispering Wahguru, a desert becomes a lush field. Holding kilos of sugar and rice in his two palms, he feeds numerous famished ascetics. Hiding his body in the very elements – earth, water, fire, air – he disappears.

The Janamsakhi narratives may not be factually true, but by being not true, the stories can tell the truth "often more beautifully and memorably than stories that relied on being true" (Rushdie 2021). Guru Nanak's "miracles" differ from their Western semantic sense; they are based on the aesthetic principle of *vismad* generated by Guru Nanak himself. From the Sanskrit root *smi*, the word is etymologically related with the Greek *meidian*, to smile, and Latin *miraculum*, to wonder. Rather than focus on the protagonist's supernatural grandeur, his wondrous performances strike upon the inner eye and play upon the imagination of his audience. The Guru enacts them to empower his interlocuters, not defeat them. Witty and playful they wander from the protagonist to the wonders of our own bodies and those that surround us – human or natural – and incite us to expect the extraordinary events in the daily rhythms of ordinary life. Pictures of Guru's simple acts challenge men and women in all walks of life to interrogate their innate assumptions. Why adhere mechanically to oppressive cultural codes and segregations? Why confine the Divine to one place or one direction? What is not spiritual about this body or about the physical elements fire, water, earth, air? Why should "physical feet" be subordinate to a "thinking head"? If fiery anger and sizzling ego and their like were flushed out, would the body not become serene and cool? Why abandon home with its social, political, and economic responsibilities to practice austerities far off in the mountains and

jungles? Of course, the earth is full of rich resources like shining gold and nourishing waters – but what about all the garbage selfishly being buried into it? Janamsakhi scenes expose a new and liberating mode of unity, human dignity, and environmental respect. Their contagion quick to spread ends up empowering audiences.

Let us look at an example of Nanakian miracle (#3). While a young Nanak sleeps under a tree, its shade remains immobile, protecting him from the scorching sun. This pan-Indian symbol relays Nanak's "supernatural" quality. In a popular Jataka story, young Buddha's couch is placed under a thick Jambu tree whose shadow remains steady to protect the enlightened one. Alam Chand's painting accomplishes something more with its playfulness. We see a row of birds flying towards the left, ripe mangoes swinging from the tree above, the horse in the foreground galloping, its rider pointing excitedly, and the person across from him gasping in amazement. Up in the skies the anthropomorphic face of the sun betrays a wild curiosity. Alam Chand's depiction of the big wide eyes of the sun (*surya*), the "eye" of the gods Mitra, Varuna, and Agni of Vedic literature (Rig Veda I:115), makes the scene all the more theatrical. In the center of it all we see young Nanak serenely asleep. His body at rest seems to have gathered the multivalent dynamism of his landscape. Paradoxically, the sleeping Guru Nanak takes away the attention from himself and instead awakens spectators to the richness that surrounds everybody at every moment. The dormant figure leaves spectators wondering: what mysterious panoramic happenings are going on in Nanak's interior landscape? The borderless dream world is full of possibilities. Science teaches how each cell of the human body is an elaborate biochemical computer with its own power management and information-processing structures. The sleeping youngster in Alam's painting opens us to the vast potential of the human body along with its exciting unconscious world full of "miracles."

Ironically, McLeod, the leading scholar of janamsakhi source materials to whom the academy is deeply indebted, warns Sikh men and women against these wondrous stories:

Given the emphasis which is typically laid on stories concerning Guru Nanak there is a risk that Sikhism as a whole may come to be associated with the kind of marvels and miracles which are the janam-sakhis stock-in-trade. . . . Seemingly harmless stories can be lethal to one's faith.

(McLeod 1989: 22)

No, these stories are not "lethal" by any means! First seen and read in the laps of parents and grandparents, they are the "food" that continues to feed Sikh individual and collective identity. They are the animating forces that open the imagination and enrich emotional, social, artistic reservoirs.

5 Transcendent Body

The most miraculous incident recorded in the janamsakhis has to be Alam Chand's penultimate scene (#56). Iconologically, it varies from his standard illustrations. Guru Nanak's torso is bare, a yellow garment goes around from his waist to his knees, and he is not wearing his colorful turban. He is pointing to his black and blue skin near his ribcage as he stands on a small black square stool with two pots beside him in the middle plane. He is bathing himself with a jug of water, while his successor, Guru Angad, watches him. Alam Chand's illustration compellingly reveals the integral Sikh *guru-bani* identity. As the sakhi reads, the evening before, a shepherd was reciting Arati Sohila while grazing his sheep in a thorny terrain. The Guru's bruises are a concrete proof of his corporeal presence in his hymn. Along with Guru Angad, audiences perceive the porous nature of Guru Nanak's physical body, its fusion with his metaphysical word. The first Guru's conception of the



Figure 27.5 Tree's Shadow Stays Still.

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“ontological, orientational, and structural” *guru-bani* identity gestating in the spiritual womb of the next four Gurus, delivered by the fifth in 1604, and invested with Guruship by the tenth in 1708, unfurls palpably before our very eyes (NGK Singh 2008: 157–176).

In their subtle, innovative miraculous imaginings, the *janamsakhis* are extremely “sophisticated” and elicit new visual and verbal readings. Sadly, their pioneering scholar McLeod comments on the *guru-bani* identity explicitly articulated and vividly seen in #56 as “uncharacteristically sophisticated for this section of the *janam-sakhi*” (in his notes, McLeod 1981: 227). These narratives resist ordinary vision, which, as Paul Ricoeur says, “is attached to the ordinary use of words. . . . The eclipse of the objective, manipulable world thus makes way for the revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth” (Ricoeur 1976: 68).

Alam Chand suspends the curtain so audiences recognize Nanakian unicity deposited in B40’s vibrant iconography and get to rejoice in the *khusi* solicited by the local 1733 Sikh community. “Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression” (Tolstoy 1899: 41). Whether it is Sikh coins

(Melikian-Chirvani 1999: 63), gold tokens (Goswamy 2000: 186), swords and quoits (Goswamy 2000: 70–71),² embroidered scarves (Sethi 2017: 259), Nanak paintings by Arpana Caur or by MF Husain, Guru Nanak's pluralistic imagination defines Sikh art and iconography and embraces artists and receptionists across time and space in its never-ending aesthetic arc.

Notes

- 1 Panjabi text refers to wife Sulakhni, but since Nanak appears quite young in the painting, we assume the artist chose to depict Mata Tripta.
- 2 Sword from the Arms Gallery in the Old Fort in Patiala shows Guru Nanak seated with Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala close to its hilt, and along the blade are his successor Gurus seated in the company of their devotees.

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CONTOURS OF *KALAKARI*

Contemporary Sikh Art and Artists in the Global Sikh Diaspora

Tavleen Kaur and Jagdeep Singh Raina

Introduction

In line with the theme of this anthology, in this chapter we explore the idea of encounter, though specifically with regard to contemporary Sikh art.¹ In academia “Sikh art” has been categorized into miniature painting, manuscript illustration, and fresco design before the nineteenth century, Western-style portraiture during the colonial period, calendar or “bazaar art” of the mid-twentieth century, and abstract art from the late-twentieth century.² Our purpose is to present and analyze Sikh-themed art produced by contemporary Sikh artists from across the global Sikh diaspora. By “art,” we mean film, digital art, mixed media art, paintings, photography, sculpture, and theater.

Prior to this point, though there has been academic work on Sikh art in the areas listed above, not much focus has been devoted to contemporary Sikh artists and their work.³ The contemporaneity of the artists is not only due to their age. Rather, their artwork, as well as our contextualization and analysis of it, illustrates how various encounters from within our lifetimes have shaped the work. For some of the artists, this encounter means responding to the violence of racialization, statecraft, and heteronormativity that they have witnessed and experienced. For others, the artwork enables them to work through various forms of literal and metaphorical violence and offer the resulting work as a tribute to collective memory. Lastly, for some of the artists, reviving historical artistic traditions and using them to illustrate contemporary issues and encounters connects the artists and their work with rich pasts and ensures the traditions’ longevity.

This chapter is unprecedented in the lineage of academic work on Sikh art for a number of reasons. First, it is the first time that this particular collection of Sikh artists and their work are being featured in one space, creating conversation among and across disparate artists and art. Second, writing on art by contemporary Sikh artists has allowed us to be in conversation with each of the artists. These conversations have ensured foregrounding the voices of the artists in how they describe their work and the motivations behind their creations. Third, we are not only writing about the art from a distance. Because we share cultural and linguistic traditions with the artists, we see ourselves represented in the work and are able to immerse ourselves in the art. This immersion allows us to avoid Orientalizing and exotifying the art. Given this range of reasons, we demonstrate that these artists are not merely producing “art for art’s sake.” Rather, their artistic production is intimately tied to their lives and ours. Given the various types of encounters that the artists have responded

and reacted to through their creations, readers of this chapter will also see parts of their own lives as global political subjects represented in the artwork.

We asked the artists about the challenges they have faced in creating Sikh-themed art. The resistance some artists have faced appears to be due to three underlying reasons. One reason is that viewers see the art veering away from the assumed and accepted paths of artistic conventions associated with the historical styles that some of the artists use, particularly for miniature painting and calligraphy. The second reason is that the art depicts moments from Sikh history in a way that goes against mainstream narratives on the illustrated topics. A third reason for the resistance artists have faced when sharing their work publicly on- and offline is due to the art and artists' challenging heteropatriarchy.

Some of the artists shared that the external resistance they faced eventually became internally negotiated struggles. For instance, one artist shared that some audiences saw their artwork and immediately put it in visual parameters and identification familiar to the viewers' eyes. That is to say, the artist did not create the work with visual parameters and comfortable identifiers in mind. In fact, the artist's intention was the exact opposite of this – to break out of boxes placed upon art and artists. Another challenge that the artists discussed with us was of art production and assumptions thereof on professionalism. Not unlike other artists, the ones whom we interviewed also mentioned that they received skepticism on their chosen career paths in pursuit of art. In addition to cultural and societal expectations artists typically face of choosing a more conventional career path, the artists we've written about face an additional, dual layer of resistance to pursuing *Sikh* art (as discussed above).

The idea of struggle and resistance is also evident in how we have organized this chapter into four themes: revival and subversion; violence, pain, and trauma; dismantling binaries; and storytelling. The theme of revival and subversion includes paintings in the historic miniature style of South Asia, studied and reutilized by Rupy C. Tut and Jatinder Singh Durhailay, as well as pen and ink sketches by Gagan Singh, in which he challenges and subverts the patriarchal narrativizations of Sikh history from the Guru period. Violence, pain, and trauma include mixed media work by Aman Singh "Inquisitive," Gagan Singh, and Rupy C. Tut. Gagan Singh invokes his eyewitness accounts of the anti-Sikh, state-sanctioned violence from 1984 in India, while Aman Singh and Rupy C. Tut respond to racialized, white supremacist hate violence directed towards Muslim and "Muslim-looking" people (namely Sikhs) following 9/11, and the Oak Creek *gurdwara* shootings in 2012. The theme of dismantling binaries includes pencil, pen, and ink works by Jasjyot Singh Hans. Hans challenges binary and narrow constructs of gender, beauty, and heteronormativity. Lastly, storytelling includes gurbani-inspired paint and digital work by Baljinder Kaur, and stageplays by Paneet Singh. Singh has created two shows, one inspired by Sikh and South Asian diasporic history, particularly from the Northwestern part of North America, and the other from present-day sociocultural dynamics of the region.

Revival and Subversion

The old world of Indian miniature painting is resurrected and transformed in the intricate works on handmade paper by Punjab-born, California-based artist Rupy C. Tut. She is an Oakland-based visual artist blending mainly two unique traditional art forms: calligraphy and Indian miniature painting. Her work is particularly remarkable for her strict practice with traditional materials and methods associated with calligraphy and Indian miniature painting. Ground pigments, meticulous lines of calligraphy, and handmade paper are some of the materials Tut has rigorously devoted herself to learning. These methodologies are rich and ancient in their histories, yet she uses them in a way that dismantles linear notions of time. She reaches into the past and pulls these traditional

ways of artmaking into the present. Tut complicates our relationships with the ways we think about art-making today, forcing us to step outside the trend of fast production and consumption. Qualities of care and patience are poetically present in these works. They are a reminder of the need to slow down and take our time when we seek to create beauty. They boldly confront the slippery and dangerous practices of instant validation, gratification, and the need to produce constantly for the sake of commodity that haunt the art world today. Tut becomes the soulful artist who carries the past of rich traditions of artmaking with her, while she continues to look ahead into the unknown.

Rupy C. Tut's *Burden* (see Figure 28.1) is a piece of unavoidable and unequivocal messages of pain and trauma, yet the piece centers on the idea of silence. The piece captures multiple moments: a woman leaving behind her life yet carrying as much of it as possible due to the traumatizing encounter with Partition; a woman who, like many others, may have been raped and then shamed (if not subject to "honor killings"); a woman who has seen these horrors first hand and carries the burden of these painful memories and of the silence surrounding other stories from Partition. The woman supports herself with a walking stick, as items slip and fall from the overwhelmingly large bundle on her back.



Figure 28.1 *Burden*, Rupy C. Tut.

16 in. × 12 in.

Natural stone and organic pigments on handmade hemp paper

2017

The viewer sees a portion of what appears to be a bridal *dupatta* and a pair of keys slipping from the bundle. The viewer also sees an origami boat, a book, a piece of jewelry, and a pot. These are the physical markers of a lived experience abruptly interrupted by senseless violence and politics.

Jatinder Singh Durhailay's work also recreates yet redefines miniature painting. Durhailay is an artist and musician living and working in London, United Kingdom. He is professionally trained in art and Indian classical music in the Dhrupad style. The *mélange* of his artistic, musical, and "real" worlds is clearly reflected in his work. Not unlike his contemporary, Rupy C. Tut, Durhailay picks apart the historical conventions of miniature painting to cultivate skill and preserve methods. His pieces recall the period of Punjab Hill Miniature paintings, where figures are donned in lush settings of gardens, jungles, and wide open doors. These settings are juxtaposed by figures in contemporary clothing and accessories.

In *I'll Be Your Sportsman* (see Figure 28.2), three male figures, each in a different style of turban, are seated in profile. Their clothing places them in the present moment, yet the painting style and



Figure 28.2 *I'll Be Your Sportsman*, Jatinder Durhailay.

7.87 in. × 5.9 in.

Gouache on handmade hemp paper

2018

composition counter this association because the work links to miniature paintings of the nineteenth century. The men's turban styles speak of diaspora encounters: the man in the Nike shirt wears dark sunglasses, holds a *dhal* (shield), and wears a Sikh warrior-style *dumala* (round turban). Another man wears a Puma shirt, holds a meditation rosary, has one hand up in the air (in a contemplative manner found in historical miniature painting), and wears a "Namdhari style" turban (a style particular to the Namdhari tradition). The third man wears an Adidas shirt, holds a smartphone in one hand, and has his other hand raised like the second man. This man wears a "Kenyan style" turban, a style popularized by Sikh men who migrated to East Africa. The composition sits equally as comfortably in 2020 as it does in a time of two hundred years prior. Durhailay frequently creates these playful juxtapositions of time, showing figures sitting placidly on the floor, holding *shastar* (weapons), and other regalia speaking to the history of martial arts and resilience in Sikh identity. His figures could be both from here or there, from then or now. This remixing of an old way of making with new ways of seeing allows us to embrace Punjabi Sikh identities in all their multifaceted, complex forms. Durhailay's figures step outside boundaries and disrupt the markers of history and time.

In *Kaur Panj Pyare* (see Figure 28.3) Gagan Singh uses a particular set of iconographical conventions from Sikh oral and written histories of the Khalsa initiation ceremony. Gagan Singh is a New Delhi-based artist with a master's in fine art. He creates work inspired by his own thoughts, observations, and eyewitness accounts. As evident in the specific works of his that we are writing on, Singh's radical reimagination and challenges to how certain aspects of the Sikh tradition have been historicized are refreshing and provoking. As visible in this piece, the iconography consists of five individuals surrounding an iron *bata* (bowl), with one of the five individuals holding the *bata* and standing near a sixth individual who is in genuflection before the five. The iconography presents an easily recognizable scene: the Khalsa initiation ceremony, as led by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. Another format of this iconographic representation flips the action, such that the five individuals are in genuflection before the Guru Gobind Singh, as the Guru administers *amrit* from the *bata* to the *Panj Pyare*. Gagan Singh's representation uses and reimagines conventions. For instance, while the piece is easily recognizable as showing the Khalsa initiation ceremony, its individual components veer away from normative narrativization of the historical event from 1699. Rather than showing an all-male scene, as is traditionally discussed and depicted with regard to the Khalsa initiation ceremony, Gagan Singh imagines it as an all-female event. The piece neither specifies nor claims whether it depicts the *amrit sanchar* ceremony from 1699 or one from any time thereafter. The artist shared that he made the Khalsa initiation scene an all-female one out of hope, as most depictions of such ceremonies are heavily male-centered.

The women are dressed in traditional Punjabi attire of *salwar kameez* (tunic with loose-fitting pants), with *dupattas* (scarves) over their heads, and *kirpans* (swords) in their hands. This clothing choice also veers away from traditional attire style worn by those leading the initiating ceremony. By centralizing on a feminist representation of the event, Gagan Singh's rendering of the scene radically reinterprets how the initiation ceremony is typically understood. Each of the five women *Panj Pyare* and the sixth woman in genuflection receiving *amrit* is shown wearing clothing with subtle patterns, accented in ink through a combination of dotted and solid lines, as well as abstract shapes and marks. Though the only color of the piece comes from black ink on white paper, the way that the artist manipulates a monochromatic aesthetic choice adds depth and intricacy to the piece. No two *dupattas* are similar; even the women's *kirpans* are thoughtfully and individually detailed. Each of the women looks in a different direction, with none making eye contact with the viewer. The piece is deeply intimate, as the women's gazes make them appear to be in a silent exchange with one another. In spite of the perceived silence between the piece and its viewers, those familiar



Figure 28.3 Kaur Panj Pyare, Gagan Singh.

6 in. × 7 in.

Ink on paper

2007

with the symbolic meanings of the Khalsa initiation ceremony will know exactly what is being communicated in the piece: total obliteration of social hierarchies, as exemplified in Guru Gobind Singh genuflecting before the Panj Pyare in 1699 after administering *amrit* to them. His genuflection signifies that the master becomes the student (Sikh), and the student the master, of the Guru's transference of authority to Guru Granth and Guru Panth.

Violence, Pain, and Trauma

Gagan Singh's untitled sketch (see Figure 28.4) does not just reflect pain; it *is* pain. Upon first glance, this piece may not register to lay viewers as "art," yet for the artist, this ink sketch recalls undying



Figure 28.4 Untitled, Gagan Singh.

8.27 in. × 11.69 in.

Pen and ink on paper

2019

memories of witnessing anti-Sikh state violence carried out by the Indian state in 1984. The sketch shows a seemingly expressionless figure, looking to the right, hair tied up in a topknot *jura*, and shirtless. We only see the figure up to his mid-chest. The text underneath the sketch reads, “How to become invisible?” None of these visual and textual markers would let the viewer know that the piece comes from Gagan Singh’s recollection of the violence from 1984. We only know of this link because of the information the artist shared with us about this piece. Perhaps Gagan Singh leaves out any explicit link to 1984 because the pain in the figure’s eyes could speak to viewers about pain in their respective lives, unrelated to 1984. Photographs showing the human and material devastation from 1984, as well as other artists’ (often anonymous) paintings commemorating the event show explicit violence, the kind of images and representations that may require trigger warnings and advise viewer discretion. Though Gagan Singh’s sketch does not depict dead bodies and an obliterated Akal Takht *gurdwara* building, these memories are seared into the eyes of the figure the artist creates. Gagan and the (possibly autobiographical) figure have both seen too much; they both seek invisibility. When we asked for a brief description of the work, Gagan Singh explained the work as “remembering a moment where even stepping out of the house was pointless, as the identity cannot be hidden. The mob was getting nearer. Days, time did not make sense.”⁴ Despite it being purposely minimalist in composition, the sketch speaks volumes on these sentiments. It shows that the memory of 1984 is just as powerful through photographs of dead bodies and buildings as it is through sketches. *Pain is in the eyes of the beholder.*

Amandeep Singh, better known as Inkquisitive, creates digital renderings that mix together hues of watercolor and ink. Aman Singh is based in London, where he received bachelor’s and master’s degrees in illustration. As a child, Aman took inspiration from watching his father do calligraphy, which inspired him to pick up a pen and eventually transform his art to what it is today – a mixed media practice ranging in topic from Sikh history to pop culture. His works are easily identifiable due to the stylistic continuity between them, as well as because of his iconic use of vibrant color.

In these meticulous works, Aman Singh depicts complex histories of Sikhs mediating between their experiences in the diaspora and those in the Global South. In two works in particular, this urgency reveals stories of Sikh communities affected by Islamophobic hate violence. The *9/11 Tribute (Sikh Community)* (see Figure 28.5) and *Wisconsin Tribute* (see Figure 28.6) both tell similar stories, though from different anchor points of time.

The *9/11 Tribute* shows a hollowed silhouette of a Sikh man with a beard, wearing an orange turban. In lieu of facial expressions, we see the iconic, pre-attack Twin Towers and a shorter skyscraper, which, in this image, sit where the figure’s eyes would be. They stand in a sky lit with green and yellow, fiery washes. The Brooklyn Bridge sits where the man’s nose and mouth would be, enmeshed with the man’s curly brown beard. The image conveys panic and urgency, hauntingly showing both the pre-attack and en-attack moments. While the skyscrapers stand unaffected, two airplanes on each side of the turban are depicted seared into it. The image asks the viewers to reflect on who is feeling the violence from these attacks. The fabric of the turban is stained with blood, and in large, all-caps letters at the topmost part of the image are the words “EDUCATE YOURSELF.” When he shared the work on social media, Aman Singh implored his viewers unfamiliar with turbans and beards to do their homework and learn more about people racialized and victimized due to Islamophobia. The bottom of the image has a personal note by the artist: “Stop bashing down the Sikh community. Thanks, a Sikh.” The note speaks directly to the viewers, especially those who also see Sikhs as suspect.

Aman Singh’s *Wisconsin Tribute* is loud. It screams of the anguish that is captured in two words that resonate intensely deeply for Sikhs across the world: Oak Creek. The work shows the pain that

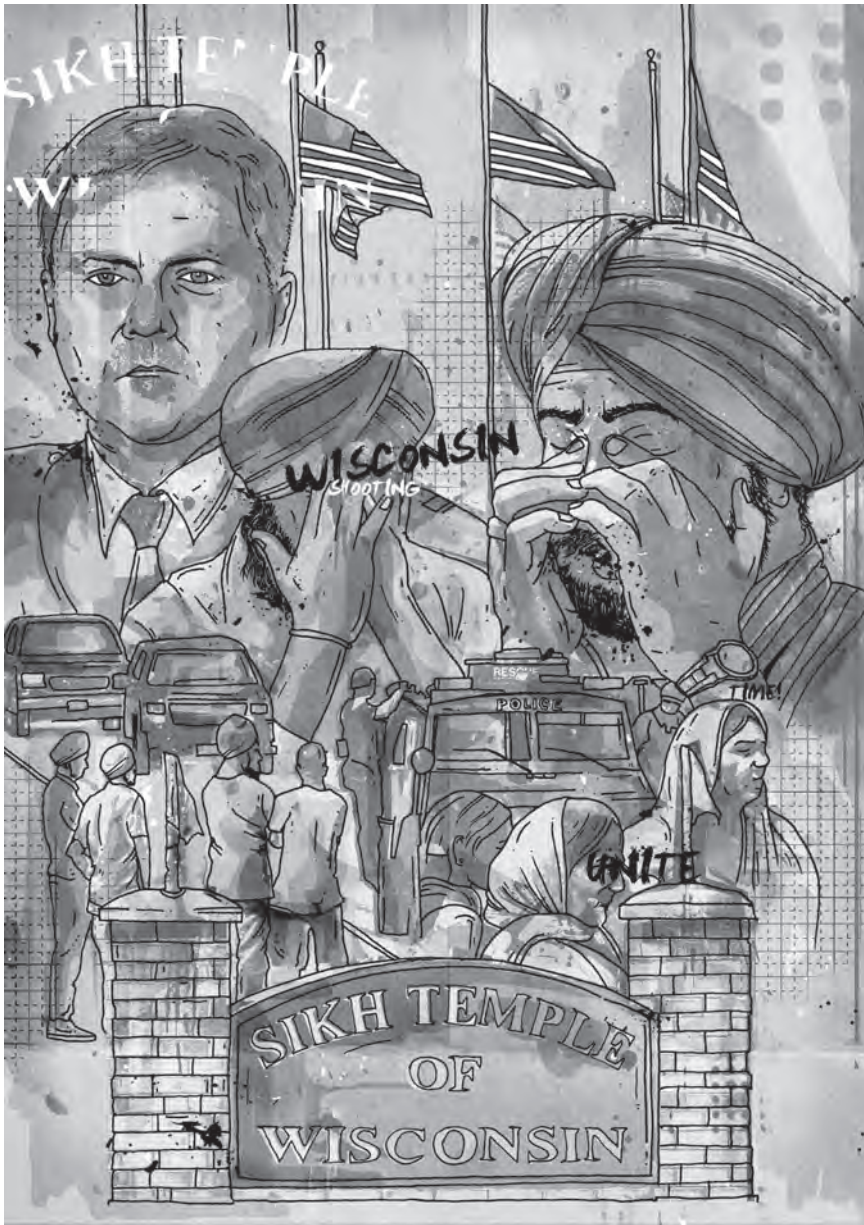


Figure 28.5 9/11 Tribute (Sikh Community), Aman Singh Inkquisitive.

8.27 in. × 11.69 in.

Indian ink, watercolors, and digital enhancements

2016



Figure 28.6 *Wisconsin Tribute*, Aman Singh Inkquisitive.

8.27 in. × 11.69 in.

Indian ink, watercolors, and digital enhancements

2012

the Sikh community worldwide felt after the shootings at the Oak Creek *gurdwara* in Wisconsin in 2012, where a white supremacist took the lives of six Sikhs before turning the gun on himself. Three male figures occupy the largest space in the work. Among them is Lieutenant Brian Murphy, the first respondent on site, who was seriously injured by the shooter. The other two figures are turbaned Sikh men, both of whom are wiping or holding back tears. Murphy is the only one looking directly out from the piece. What could be the message here? This query is open to the viewer to reflect upon. Below these three figures are police vehicles and personnel, and immediately below the vehicles is an array of Sikh community members, most with their backs to the viewers of the work, and some facing the side. The scene is chaotic, and its red, orange, and yellow hues further enhance the chaos. The bottom of the composition shows the *gurdwara*'s brick-and-mortar entrance plaque, which reads, "SIKH TEMPLE OF WISCONSIN."

US flags at half-mast are also in the composition, flying above the three male figures. The flags hang their heads in shame, wistfully swinging back and forth, perhaps also indicative of a decaying empire desperately trying to hold onto the vestiges of geopolitical power through imperialistic occupations and operations across the globe. In the middle of the work are the words "Wisconsin

shooting”; below, to the far right, is “unite.” The artist’s message is clear here: he implores viewers to unite in the wake of hate. Both of the artworks are awash with limited yet powerful color palettes. Vibrant oranges, yellows, and reds meet the dark contour and line quality of the ink, with the latter swimming across the surface, constructing these narratives. The unique process that Singh has developed for himself centers stories of Sikhs in dreamlike settings. The settings act as reminders to Sikh viewers to always remember their lineages and histories marked by bloodshed and anguish and humility and grace.

Rupy C. Tut’s work is not limited to miniature painting. On a scale quite opposite to miniature painting, her work in four burlap panels of nearly 20 feet each scream at the viewer (see Figure 28.7 for one of the panels).⁵



Figure 28.7 *Breaking the Hate Helix II*, Rupy C. Tut.

54 in. × 19 ft.

Acrylic on jute

2019

Rupy shared with us that

these panels depict the words “no, stop, out, you, us” in English and multiple South Asian scripts including Gurmukhi, Devanagari, and Tamil. These five words are some of the most common in hateful vandalism and hate speech that targets places of worship, homes, and work associated with middle eastern or South Asian communities.⁶

Muslims and people racialized as “Muslim-looking” (i.e., Sikh) people are no strangers to these hateful words being hurled at them by white supremacists. In these panels, Rupy speaks back to white supremacists. Her anger at the hate violence she has witnessed Sikhs and other communities go through is evident in how the letters are painted on the burlap. Her response is further poignant, as these particular panels also represent Rupy’s resistance to stereotypes of women needing to remain calm and collected in challenging situations. Splatter from paint on the burlap looks like bloodstains. The piece creates anxiety for the viewer, not only due to its dwarfing size. While the hateful sentiments and actions of white supremacists attacking Sikh bodies and buildings with messages like “Get out of my country!” can leave one feeling numb, Rupy’s panels jolt the viewer out of the numbness. One interpretation is that the panels speak back at white supremacists with short yet powerful responses: *no, stop, out, you, us*.

Dismantling Binaries

The work of Jasjyot Singh Hans is simultaneously groundbreaking and boundary-breaking. Based in Baltimore, Maryland, Hans holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees with training in animation film design, art, and illustration. Hans has exhibited his work in various parts of the world. His work is inspired by an explosive neon mix of fashion, music, and pop culture, while more subtly exploring themes of sexuality, body positivity, and self-love. His creative approach takes a sledgehammer and boldly smashes fixed notions of homogeneity, constructs that have romanticized what an ideal Sikh community should be like. He peels apart these layers of binary perceptions and urges us to see these communities with greater nuance. His illustrations are lush and sensuous. Women with thick locks of hair and chocolate-brown skin stare at us. For instance, in *Sikh Ladies in Sick Fashion* (see Figure 28.8), a woman is lounging in a chair, wearing an oversize shirt and track pants. In this and other works, Hans’s figures resist how the mainstream fashion industry fetishizes and reproduces unrealistic expectations of women and their bodies. Hans’s figures are completely comfortable in their own skin and hair. They look back confidently, with stern gazes that remind us of who is in the position of power: we are in *their* space. In this piece a woman sips a *banta* drink, a popular lime cola drink found in India. The woman occupies a ubiquitous, mundane space, and the *banta* bottles remind one of *desi* street-side juice corners.

The ubiquity of the scene makes it remarkable, not mundane. For instance, the figure may be sitting on an ordinary plastic lawn chair, yet in this context, the chair looks grand. Through bold mark-making and gestural washes, Hans’s figures take control and occupy the spaces they wish to own. Men are contemplative as they take refuge in bathrooms, dreaming about a future that is fluid in gender and sexuality. We find ourselves drawn into utopian fantasies of people who roam free, far from the external markers of identity that haunt them. We leave Hans’s artistic landscapes with visions of a counter-heteronormative world.



Figure 28.8 *Sikh Ladies in Sick Fashion*, Jasjyot Singh Hans.

5 in. × 7 in.

Two-color risograph

2017

Storytelling

Baljinder Kaur's soft, digital renderings are a poetic exploration of the everyday lives of Punjabi Sikhs. Kaur is a professionally trained illustrator and storyteller based in the Midlands of the United Kingdom. She uses observation of everyday life and experiences and translates them into art. Specifically, through the medium of children's picture books, she explores narratives of Punjabi and Sikh diasporas and their experiences of migration. She sees children's picture books as having the potential to bridge and heal intergenerational challenges of negotiating multiple cultures and languages.

She masterfully blurs the boundaries between diasporic spaces and those left behind in Partitioned Punjab, and her figures appear to be in mystical otherworldly landscapes. The figures remove themselves from the shackles of a fragmented community. They are stripped apart of the external markers of violence to generously give us, the viewers, a chance to connect with them, to bond over a deeper introspection to liberate the soul.

Guru Nanak the Magnificent (see Figure 28.9) depicts a dark atmosphere with opaque washes of greens, blues, and blacks depicting a forest. The composition shows six figures, including Guru Nanak; the latter's divinity is evident via the halo above his head. The figures are in deep contemplation. Their entrenchment in cosmic vibes is represented through white, wispy spirals that move through them. This is not a gathering of only humans. A supernatural, mystical figure is also in the *sangat*, yet this being is in no way an outsider. In fact, while the rest of the figures are seated on a coat of green, this being is to the side, sitting on the gray ground. Perhaps what we are witnessing is this being's dream. The figure to Guru Nanak's left dons an olive-colored turban and an orange *kurta pajama* (loose tunic and pants); he is strumming a *rabab*, indicating that this is Bhai Mardana, the Guru's closest companion on his travels. The dreamscape includes text, which reads, "Bhai Mardana plucked his rabaab and Guru Nanak began to sing, transforming beasts and beggars into Saints and Kings." The gathering in this piece is musical, mystical, and otherworldly. It is an otherworldly spiritual experience and vision placed before the viewer in the here and now, on earth, in *this* world.

While Baljinder Kaur's work takes us to the otherworld, Paneet Singh's stage plays take us back in time. Paneet Singh is a Vancouver-based playwright, filmmaker, historian, and community organizer. He is professionally trained in film production. Beyond theater and film, he co-hosts *The Nameless Collective*, a podcast that explores untold histories of South Asian communities in the greater Vancouver area. Singh wrote and directed *The Undocumented Trial of William C. Hopkinson* (see Figures 28.10 and 28.11), a play set in October 1914 at the Vancouver Provincial Courthouse.



Figure 28.9 *Guru Nanak the Magnificent*, Baljinder Kaur.

8.66 in. × 10.63 in.

Digital pen and tablet (mixed media, textile, collage, printmaking)

2020



Figure 28.10 Harwant Brar as Mewa Singh and Sidartha Murjani as Bhag Singh.

The Undocumented Trial of William C. Hopkinson, photo by Pardeep Singh Photography

90 mins. stage play written and directed by Paneet Singh

2016



Figure 28.11 Brad Bergeron as H.H. Stevens, Sacha Romalo as Justice Morrison, and Patrick Nagel as William C. Hopkinson.

The Undocumented Trial of William C. Hopkinson, photo by Pardeep Singh Photography

90 mins. stage play written and directed by Paneet Singh

2016

The play depicts the reexamination of Mewa Singh's case. Mewa Singh is on the stand for assassinating William Charles Hopkinson, an Indian-born, Hindi-speaking Canadian immigration inspector who ensured that all 376 South Asian passengers (more than 300 of whom were Sikh) of the chartered Komagata Maru did not land on Canadian soil. Mewa Singh openly admits to his act of killing. As Paneet describes, "The assassination of Inspector Hopkinson was the culmination of a simultaneous transnational struggle seeking independence for colonized British India, and a struggle for civil rights for South Asians living on the West Coast of North America."⁷

As Paneet explains, the play was performed at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the building that was formerly the Vancouver Provincial Courthouse. It is the exact location of Hopkinson's murder. The precision of the site is remarkable for its link to the events that the play presents. In a time when nearly all Sikh historical architectural lineage has been lost to "marbelous" structures, the play's context and literal, original setting of the courthouse presents a unique example of Sikh diaspora-related sites. Paneet's play does not tell a story of what could have been. It is a direct re-encounter with what was, indeed.

Conclusion

This chapter is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. Given editorial and communication constraints, we have only been able to present a few contemporary Sikh artists (see Index for a longer list of artists). From the few stories and images herein, it is evident that "Sikh art" is not only about bazaar art images of the Gurus. Various types of encounters have deeply shaped the artists and their art that we've written about. "Sikh art" is as broad, wide, diverse, and contested as the global Sikh diaspora itself. We thank the artists for sharing their words, vision, and wisdom with us. We hope this chapter has provided a brief, provoking glimpse into the vast world of Sikh art.

Jagdeep Singh Raina is an artist living and working between Los Angeles, California, and Guelph, Ontario. He holds an MFA degree in painting and a BFA in studio art and English literature. Tavleen Kaur holds a doctoral degree in visual studies. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She researches contemporary hate violence on the bodies and buildings of racialized communities.

Notes

- 1 "Routledge Critical Sikh Studies. Encounters Across the Disciplines," 2019, www.routledge.com/religion/series/RCSSEAD.
- 2 Kerry Brown, *Sikh Art and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002); W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 3 Brown, *Sikh Art and Literature*; B.N. Goswamy, *Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art* (New Delhi: National Museum, 2000); "Religion"; McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art*; Kavita Singh, *New Insights Into Sikh Art* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003).
- 4 Our thanks to Gagan Singh for sharing this description with us.
- 5 It is important to note the context in which these panels were initially viewed. Rupy shared the following with us: "These panels were included in a visual art and dance theater show called Broken Seeds Taking Root which premiered in San Francisco in March 2019. The show took place in a black box theater with a screen that showed artwork and projections created by Rupy along with *bharatnatyam* choreographed by Nadhi Thekkekk. Delicately crafted visual projections of Rupy's paintings and process interacted in multiple ways with dance to highlight the 1947 Partition (first half) and the South Asian American experience (second half). The final act of the show included a choreographed reveal of these panels hung behind the black curtains. The panels and words on them occupied space on stage along with performers who react to the panels with emotions of numbness, anger, denial, as well as call to action."
- 6 Our thanks to Rupy C. Tut for sharing this description with us.
- 7 Our thanks to Paneet Singh for sharing a written summary of the play.

CONSERVATION PHILOSOPHY FOR PUNJAB

Gurmeet S. Rai

Introduction

Geographically and culturally, the Sikh tradition originated more than five centuries ago in Punjab, the Land of the Five Rivers, in northwestern India, a frontier zone known for the rich interaction between different segments of the society and cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. The lifeline of the Sikhs is, therefore, closely linked with their homeland – Punjab. To understand the cultural heritage of Punjab and the means of conservation, we shall address the following questions: what is or should be the philosophy of conservation in Punjab? How do the people of Punjab define “heritage” in their minds, hearts, and lives? Are principles of conservation embedded in the Sikh way of life?

Through ancient, medieval, and modern times, the history of Punjab reveals frequent changes in its political boundaries. At times, these extended till the farthest limits of the northwestern frontiers, the great Himalayas in the north, the ancient and medieval city of Delhi in the east, and till the mouth of the River Indus in the south. A distinctive feature to which the region owes its geomorphological characteristics is Punjab’s five rivers – Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab, and Jhelum – all originating in the Himalayas and converging into the mighty Indus. The history of Punjab and its cultural narratives encompass the story not only of politicians, princes, and priests but also of the people of this region.

The single most distinctive cultural element that defines the ever-evolving cultural heritage of Punjab is the cultural and trade route – Uttarapath in ancient times, Badshahi Sadak in medieval times, and Grand Trunk Road in the colonial and postcolonial times – cutting across the land and the mighty rivers. The overland route was overrun by waves of human migration – traders, invaders, pilgrims, and more – bringing with them ways of life that influenced the setting up of human habitat, cities, agricultural, culinary and vestimentary practices amongst others, languages, beliefs and rituals, means of transport, distinct economic activities and models, and modes of governance that provided the foundation of a great civilization at times through a rich inter-civilizational dialogue, and at others, by sheer coercion. Punjab’s changing political boundaries notwithstanding, what survives in a people is their intangible heritage – their language, folklore, poetry, practices, belief, faith and memories, against the backdrop of an ever-changing, ever-evolving tangible heritage. And it is precisely with such timeless practices that people engage with the tangible manifestations of their culture.

For cultural heritage practitioners, heritage is perceived as immovable/movable and intangible cultural expressions and manifestations of a way of life. A close scrutiny of the existing tools for heritage management, including the multifarious task of identifying, mapping, recognizing, protecting, conserving heritage, and of the means of governance, raises several questions. This is particularly relevant in the postcolonial context of Punjab, India, especially when across the world, equitable and inclusive models of governance are being advocated as the acceptable ways for sustainable development of which cultural rights form an indispensable component.

I shall now attempt to describe the term “heritage” in a manner that closely resonates with my practice of heritage conservation:

Heritage constitutes the entire gamut of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects and culture. Most importantly, it comprises the swathe of contemporary activities, meanings and behaviour available to us to draw from. While heritage includes preserving, excavating, displaying, or restoring a collection of old things, it signifies far more than that. It is both tangible and intangible – the ideas and memories of songs, recipes, dances, languages, dialects, along with other elements pertaining to who we are and how we identify ourselves, are as important as historic buildings and archaeological sites.

Heritage is, or ought to be, the subject of active public reflection, debate and discussion. What is worth saving? What can we forget? Should we forget anything? What memories can we enjoy, regret, or learn from? Who owns the “past” and who is entitled to speak for the past generations? Active public discussion about material and intangible heritage – of individuals, groups, communities, and nations – is a valuable facet of public life in our multi-cultural world.

Heritage conservation is a contemporary activity with far-reaching consequences. It could either be an element of farsighted urban and regional planning, or it could constitute a platform for political recognition, a medium for intercultural dialogue, a means of ethical reflection and a potential basis for local economic development. It is simultaneously local, and global and shared, given that heritage is an essential part of the present we live in, and of the future we shall build.

(University of Massachusetts, Amherst Centre for Heritage & Society)

A close look at the list of heritage monuments and sites protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in Punjab reveals a range of buildings and sites, mostly of monumental scale, that represent “iconic” heritage sites. An examination of the list of buildings and sites protected by the State government of Punjab throws up “mixed” list of sites. The list of ASI monuments includes the following: sites of the Indus Valley, vestiges of the Kushan period, medieval monuments like serais and *kos minars* along the Mughal Road, a select number of palaces and forts of later periods, amongst others. Those protected by the State government include these as well as sites associated with the Anglo-Sikh battles that are of regional significance and a few sites associated with freedom fighters of national stature. Are the two lists of recognized monuments and sites comprehensive and representative of the diverse people/communities across the geographical spread of the places? Are these lists representative of human ingenuity over time, marking important events and places, inclusive of all architectural typologies, associated with personalities revered by the local communities, and recognized for their contributions to local, regional, and national histories? Missing from these lists are crucial elements from the “working landscape” of Punjab, including sites and buildings associated with the people of Punjab – writers, poets, artisans, the ordinary folks – historic cities and urbanism, recognizing their interrelationships in a historic urban landscape; industrial heritage sites that represent the values of a people – for instance, those that honor the contribution of the people

of Punjab to the British Indian Army in World War I and to the struggle for independence, of those associated with the Ghadar movement, a significant chapter in India's struggle for freedom.

The first step in heritage conservation and management is to have a well-represented list of significant sites, spaces, structures, buildings, precincts, amongst others, drawn up by the concerned communities, using a dialogic participatory methodology, with the participation of all the stakeholders, additionally facilitated by the participation of a multidisciplinary team comprising cultural historians and specialists, the academia, and conservation practitioners.

The oft-changing political boundaries of Punjab State has impacted not only its demography but also how its people perceive their cultural heritage. During the British Raj (1857–1947), the land west of River Sutlej was under the British crown while the land on the east bank remained under the Phulkian State. Through the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) administered the monuments in the region west of River Sutlej – the Mughal-period serais in village Jehangir, Serai Amanat Khan, the Indus Valley sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, sites from the Gandhara period, and the archaeological remains of Taxila, to name a few. It was only after India gained Independence that the Phulkian State was brought under the Republic of India. And following its merger with the Punjab State of India in 1956, and the enactment of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, a State Act, in 1964, that historic monuments and sites were identified in this region and brought under the protection of the State Department of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology, and Museums.

The historic event that irrevocably altered the cultural narrative and fabric of this region was the Partition of India in 1947 that cleaved Punjab into two forever, dealing a tragic blow to the land and its people. For centuries, this land had celebrated the Sufi Bhakti tradition, a pluralistic ethos that was destroyed on the contentious basis of religion. Overnight, more than a million people had to leave their homes of generations and move to unknown lands. Not only were they forced to leave behind their physical belongings but also centuries of accumulated memories of their forefathers and their communities. All they carried with them to the unknown lands was their stories, memories, and cultural practices.

More than seven decades after Partition, little effort has been made to understand the implications of the memories and associations of those who migrated with their heritage. How much of these or which part of these have been transmitted to the younger generations? What does heritage mean to different generations? What are the more recent cultural associations? What are the cultural moorings of these communities?

Seva, a Living Cultural Tradition as a Way of Life

Punjab is the birthplace of Sikhism, the youngest of the major world religions, and the world's fifth largest organized religion. A major theme in the history of Punjab, it forms part of the collective consciousness of the people. Memories associated with historical events, cultural narratives, and associated institutional structures guide the expression of faith and provide the bedrock of the cultural practices of the Sikh community in Punjab and of the Sikh diaspora across the globe. Several historical events from the times of the Sikh Gurus (1469–1708) are re-memorated today in the form of fairs, festivals, and cultural practices. Tenets of the Sikh faith such as voluntary service for the collective good of humanity is called *seva* – a practice witnessed in all its vibrancy during festivals, and on occasions commemorating the martyrdom of the Sikh Gurus, warrior saints, and others who sacrificed their lives for a noble cause. The tradition of voluntary offering in the form of labor, in kind, or cash is also evident in the building work of gurudwaras (Sikh shrines). Voluntary labor is also offered for the community kitchen and daily routine work in the gurudwaras.

In times of crisis, the world community has seen members of the Sikh community across the globe overreach themselves to serve the underprivileged and those in distress – for instance, the uprooted and the displaced in camps in Syria, communities impacted by bushfires in Australia, and more recently, COVID patients in need of oxygen, and the riot-affected people in Delhi. It would not be inaccurate to say that the willingness “to extend oneself into the lives of others,” to do public good is part of the collective consciousness of the Sikh community, and possibly of the larger Punjabi community as well.

***Gurmata, the Dialogic Tradition – Wisdom of the Guru in the Collective
and People’s Participation***

A conservation project of the historic building called Guru Ki Maseet (Mosque of the Guru), an early seventeenth-century mosque in Punjab, undertaken in the year 2000 under UNESCO’s Culture of Peace program demonstrated the unique practice of the dialogic tradition of the community. The mosque is believed to have been built under the direction of Guru Hargobind (1595–1644), the sixth Sikh Guru, after the Sikhs defeated the Mughals in battle of Hargobindpur in 1629. The site is located in Sri Hargobindpur in Gurdaspur District of Punjab. An “unprotected” site, its caretakers are Nihang Singhs, a sect of the Sikh community. They began looking after the site after the Muslim population left for Pakistan during Partition. Nihang Singhs as caretakers of sites associated with Guru Hargobind mark a centuries-old tradition.

As part of the conservation team, we approached Baba Kirtan Singh, the head of the Tarna Dal of the Nihang Singhs, at their headquarters in Baba Bakala in Amritsar District to seek his permission to undertake conservation work. He lent us a patient ear as we explained to him the significance of the site as a demonstration of the pluralistic spirit of Punjab. We also described to him the principles of material conservation with the use of traditional materials (in the case of the mosque, that would be recycled historic bricks called Nanakshahi bricks), mud mortar in the core masonry, and lime-based plasters and mortars for the floors. We explained that we had to match the materials with the original building material since, in the long run, this was necessary and good for the restored building.

Baba Kirtan Singh reflected on the proposal. Then he asked us to meet him on a particular day in a village close to Sri Hargobindpur where he would consult with the community. We were a bit perplexed by his request. On the appointed day, we set off for the village to meet him. Upon arrival, we were received by his followers from the sect. There he was, sitting on a charpoy under a tree, surrounded by a few hundred people from the village. He introduced us to the community, and in our presence, he communicated to the community our request and the details of the materials we proposed to use in the conservation work. He sought the community’s consent by explaining to them in well-considered words of deep empathy with the community, the details and explanations presented by the conservation team. That is when I understood what he meant when he had said to me: “We shall do *gurmata* at the village.” I was fortunate enough to witness this dialogue where the past, present, and future of the monument were discussed intently between Baba Kirtan Singh and the community, while we practitioners were invited to address all their concerns and queries. The village community had immense reverence for Baba Kirtan Singh and would not have questioned his decision to grant us permission to undertake the conservation work. On his part, through dialogue with the “collective,” Baba Kirtan Singh had socialized the project (Figure 29.1).



Figure 29.1 Baba Kirtan Singh consulting the community in a Gurmata at Hargobindpur.

Source: Photo by the author

Moreover, Baba Kirtan Singh told us that while the specialized works would be undertaken by masons who were to be paid daily wages, the unskilled work was to be done in accordance with the principles of *seva*. The villages around Sri Hargobindpur adopted a day each to do voluntary work at the project site. A tractor and a trolley were provided by the village community as *seva* “in kind” to transport people to the site, while we were directed to provide fuel for the tractors and run a community kitchen for the entire *sangat* (community). We followed these principles while executing the project. In doing so, the conservation process became a “memory” for the community, further highlighting the value of the monument and ensuring that it became a “people’s project” despite being funded by the State.

To Restore Is to Heal

Punjab is predominantly an agrarian landscape where cultural expressions are deeply influenced by the relationship between humans and nature and, more specifically, by ecological systems related to water as a life-giving resource. The profound relationship can be experienced in the intangible heritage, for instance in the poetry, music, festivals (based on the agricultural calendar), and folklore. Water structures are an important feature of Punjab’s sacred heritage – *sarovars* (pools) in gurudwaras, water tanks along the Mughal Road, wells and *baolis* (step wells), and so on. The industrial heritage of Punjab includes (though not officially recognized) the network of canals that provided water across the State – the first fundamental resource for ushering in the green revolution. Furthermore, till date, in the rural landscape, water tanks and ponds exist in every village, though in a poor condition.

At a philosophical level, in its Epilogue, the *Japji Sahib* – the daily prayer of the Sikhs, composed by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism and the first Sikh Guru – mentions, “Pavan guru, paani pita, maata dhart mahat . . . Air is our teacher, water our father, and the Great Earth our mother . . .” (GGS 8). Today, Punjab faces a serious threat – of environmental degradation. Decades of practices introduced through the green revolutions that, on one hand, provided food for millions in the country has, on the other, resulted in over extraction of water, leading to depleted ground water. Overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has made the soil toxic. There is an urgent need to understand the ecological systems and relationship between nature and culture. Natural heritage demands recognition, and more ecological restoration needs to be carefully and innovatively integrated into heritage conservation and urban and rural planning through policies, programs, and projects.

Heritage tourism projects such as the conservation of water tanks built along the Mughal Road, the historic water tanks in village Gandiwind in district Tarn Taran, in village Raja Taal near Atari, in village Rathar Chathar near Dera Baba Nanak, and several other places, should include conservation of the catchment too. In this manner the authenticity and integrity of the historic tanks would be protected and conserved alongside protection of the cultural landscape and ecological system.

Numerous water bodies, including wetlands, are associated with historical events. For instance, the battle site of Chhota Ghallughara (Lesser Holocaust) is a medieval battle site in a *chhamb* (perennial subterranean water source that emerges on the surface of the ground in the form of a large water body) in Gurdaspur District. It has been noted that while site interpretation centers have been built in the landscape to commemorate the battle site, its relationship with the *chhamb* is disconnected in the minds of the people and the heritage managers. As a result, the *chhamb* is steadily being filled with debris and soil to reclaim land for agricultural purposes. This approach compromises the heritage narrative, while it threatens the existence of the water bodies that are important for replenishing ground water. Water bodies too need to be protected and conserved as part of the cultural heritage conservation programs.

In projects focusing on urban planning and historic city conservation, storm water – earlier, an important water resource for tanks and ponds and for recharging ground water in urban centers – should continue to be harnessed, using innovating ecological restoration techniques. This must be undertaken specifically in historic cities where impervious surfaces overrun the cityscape.

Future of Heritage

While communities in Punjab are proud of their cultural identity – *Punjabiya* (Punjabi identity based upon Punjabi language, music, songs, dances, and humor) – heritage management suffers from limitations due to the current policies and related methods of practice at both the State and local levels. Low priority, inadequate recognition and insufficient financial support for heritage conservation and maintenance hampers the appreciation of heritage by communities. Moreover, culture is hardly addressed within the framework of planning, and promotion and marketing programs do not engage community engagement, leading to a general indifference to heritage conservation.

The problem of inadequate recognition, protection, conservation, and management applies to both cultural and natural heritage. In government programs and policies, heritage figures low on priority. Heritage management includes the entire process of identification, mapping, documentation, planning, implementation, and training and capacity building for sustained maintenance and management. There are several gaps in the value chain of heritage management. Inadequate legal redresses remains a fundamental flaw. While laws exist for sites and buildings designated as being of national and regional significance in the State, the list of what is recognized as “heritage” is

unrepresentative of the communities, historical eras, geographical spread, typologies, and more. The existing organizational structure of departments responsible for heritage management is ill equipped to undertake efficient management of the diverse cultural heritage. Insufficient financial resources impact projects too. Additionally, people's collective and individual initiatives represented in cultural traditions and traditional social institutions are treated as static resources. Existing modern legal frameworks do not encourage participatory processes, and community practices are not adequately recognized in mainstream cultural heritage conservation.

Conservation, a way of life borne out by the centuries-old wisdom of civilizations, can be witnessed in both the rural and urban landscape. Decoding the knowledge embedded in traditional architecture and meticulous planning are fundamental to arriving at sound conservation ethics. Architectural expression rooted in the land evolves over time due to cultural influences, advancement in technology, political conditions, patronage, and other factors. For instance, architecture of the common people, built with modest materials at a modest scale, and of local typologies are seldom recognized as heritage, making the heritage list not truly representative of the diverse communities. It is in these vernacular buildings that the spirit of the common people is manifested; hence such architecture is of immense heritage value too. Often embedded in this modest architecture is also immense knowledge of sustainable building practices. Principles of heritage conservation that emerge from traditions and that are inspired by the philosophy of a way of life of the people are strongly recommended as the basis for heritage management in the region. The first step in this direction would be to identify, recognize, and protect both classical and vernacular architecture through processes that are inclusive.

Besides timber, building materials in Punjab were primarily earth based. The most basic material for construction was mud bricks, sometimes sun dried, and if resources permitted, fired bricks. The mortar was in mud, with lime-based mortars sparingly used on the outermost surface to make the masonry less pervious to water-induced decay.

Embedded knowledge in material culture is fundamental to undertaking conservation. Research should be conducted on the material and techniques used in traditional practices to inform contemporary conservation methodologies. The use of modern materials and techniques in conservation should be historically compatible, reversible, and based on an in-depth understanding of the “values” of the heritage site. Mindless use of modern materials can compromise the values of heritage and hence cause irreversible loss of authenticity. Authenticity is also embedded in processes. Consultation and engagement of the keepers of traditional knowledge constitute an important part of the protection of authenticity of a heritage site.



Figure 29.2 The colonial period pump house at the site known as “40 khuh” in Amritsar. These are “un-protected” buildings of historic significance and exemplify technology of water pumping from the outskirts of the city to the walled city of Amritsar in the early part of the twentieth century.

Photo by the author

Cultural practices and tangible attributes collectively define the “values” of a site. Knowledge systems and memories and associations of communities are revealed in the practices of engagement. For instance, for sacred sites such as Sri Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, as part of the cultural practices of the faith followed faithfully, the community undertakes with immense reverence all the ritualistic activities and those related to the care and maintenance of the site. This community engagement is a very important attribute of the authenticity associated with the site.

Over the centuries, Punjab has witnessed much strife and pain. Layers of its history and memory embedded in the material culture are, therefore, contested spaces today. It is important that early in the conservation project, heritage stakeholders are identified, and through a process of dialogic consultations, an understanding is arrived at for an inclusive conservation outcome.

During the colonial period, the medieval fort at Patti was converted into a *kotwali* (police station). Later, during the post-Independence period, excavations in the courtyard of the fort revealed the foundations of the layered buildings of the police station. Though the community does not harbor pleasant memories of the police station, dialogic consultation enabled the acceptance of this layer of history.

In the Gol Kothi in Kapurthala, emergence of the architectural details of the building led to the discovery of the earliest layer of the edifice – a basement that was excavated in the central hall of the building associated with Maharaja Fateh Singh, one of the earlier kings of Kapurthala. Due to this important discovery, every effort was made to understand the site’s antiquity and associational value. Thus the conservation plan ensured that all layers of significance are conserved, with interventions that do not misrepresent the historic information and without compromising the architectural and archaeological materiality of the findings.

Communities in Punjab are often found to be disconnected from heritage sites located in their neighborhoods and larger settings, a key reason being that the colonial models of heritage recognition and conservation did not include local heritage into the development paradigm, and often buildings of significance were neglected or misused. Several instances illustrate that heritage sites of significance were put to uses that were repressive and summarily dismissive of local sensibilities. In Amritsar, Rambagh Garden, the summer palace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (a much loved and respected ruler), was extensively altered and converted into an army cantonment by the British. Rambagh Gate, one of the important gates of the walled city of Amritsar from the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was converted during the British rule into a police station. Though active use of the gate prevented the colonial masters from dismantling it while 11 other gates were demolished, post-Independence, no effort was made to recognize the significance of the gate so that it could be protected and conserved; it continued to be used as a police station for an investigating agency (for the CIA staff). Recently, through funding made available by the government of India, the building was restored, and a Lok Virsa (People’s Museum) has been set up within the gate. The process was anchored in the local community through active dialogue. Consultations revealed that the people living in the vicinity of the gate had come to Amritsar as refugees at the time of Partition in 1947. This participatory process enabled creating new memories of the community with the heritage site, hence investing the site with a new meaning for the local community.

In the conservation project of Gobindgarh Fort in Amritsar, a State-protected monument given by the armed forces to the civilian government, it has been ensured that communities have access to the monument by paying a small entry fee even though the site has been given to a private operator for operation and maintenance. Access to the mosque in the Mughal serai in Doraha – a monument protected by the Department of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology, and Museums – has been provided to the migrant workers in the region for offering their Friday prayers.



Figure 29.3 The monumental ramparts of the Gobindgarh Fort in Amritsar. The architecture of the fort is an amalgamation of the military architecture in the subcontinent with the French military engineering and planning features.

Photo by the author

During the conservation of the Krishna Temple in village Kishankot in Punjab – a project supported by the ASI under their program for supporting conservation of unprotected heritage buildings, UNESCO and UNDP-UNV program – all project activities were undertaken by community members. The initial steps of documentation were divided between the architects and the village youth. The young people were trained in tasks such as removal of lime wash from painted surfaces and stucco, which they executed with much enthusiasm, as is evident from their high-quality output.

Heritage is of the people. Buildings such as forts and palaces endowed or owned by the State, sacred sites, water bodies, public buildings, gardens and open spaces, historic public infrastructure, all form part of the heritage list. Conservation strategies must ensure that processes and programs of heritage conservation do not compromise the communities' rights over their heritage. The process of planning and the future of heritage sites and buildings must be socialized for free, prior and informed consent about the interventions.

Participatory processes informed by a dialogic approach for conservation of heritage sites ensure that the community as custodian is not excluded from the process but is, in fact, motivated to participate in the process. Inclusive participatory processes can generate a sense of well-being and further strengthen ties of younger generations with heritage sites in accordance with the prevalent cultural traditions of *seva*.

Heritage sites and buildings need to be maintained regularly. It may not be possible to do this only through State funding. Conservation experience in Punjab reveals that the local communities expect the strategies for operation and maintenance to be based on the twin principles of equity and inclusivity. For instance, in the conservation of Serai Lashkari Khan (near Khanna in Punjab), in the course of the conservation work, women from the nearby village approached the conservation team, requesting access to the open space in the site's compounds to cut the wild grass to provide fodder for their cattle – a practice that had been going on for years. They stated that the village commons were progressively shrinking, and over time, people in the village had sold their lands due to rapid urbanization in the areas surrounding the village. As a result of the loss of grasslands, they were being forced to sell their cattle as it was becoming increasingly unviable to purchase fodder. In memory of the local people of the nearby villages, the Sarai was used by the villagers as a place of simple leisure and a source of fodder for the cattle. In recent times, the Sarai drew attention due to

the publicity it received as the location used for shooting the award-winning film *Rang De Basanti* (2006).

State management protocols need to ensure that the local community is not marginalized, and that, in fact, the concerns of the local community are integrated in the site management plans.

Dignity of labor is a key principle of the work ethic in Punjab, demonstrated in various practices of the Sikh faith and the Sufi Bhakti tradition, in which many of the saints were artisans and practiced a craft or a skill. Kabir was a weaver, Baba Namdev was a tailor, and Ravidas, a cobbler. In the *seva* tradition of the Sikh faith, volunteers are engaged in the community kitchen, in managing the pilgrims' footwear, in cleaning in and around the shrines, on construction sites, and more. All kinds of work are treated with dignity. Such a work ethic needs to be practiced on heritage sites too as part of the conservation work.

Punjab is known for its extraordinary innovations and entrepreneurship skills. During the medieval period, Punjab was known for its many centers of fine arts and crafts. The art and craft movement associated with building works, and the designs of Bhai Ram Singh, the first Indian principal of Mayo College of Art in Lahore, earned much recognition for Punjabi artisans in the early twentieth century. However, over time, skills associated with building works and interiors have been rapidly disappearing. Artisans engaged on heritage sites have skills of varying degrees of quality, often learned from family members – intergenerational learning – and at times, from fellow artisans on the sites. Through experience, the absence of understanding of the materials and techniques could be remedied over time. Inadequate skills translate into low wages and an unstable system in which not only do the artisans suffer but the quality of work on the sites too is compromised. For artisans to be recognized for the quality they produce, and for improved monetary conditions, the need for better training and certification, supported by monetary compensation, must be addressed.

Today, heritage is suffering on account of dated tools for its management and the absence of integration with the development paradigm. There is an urgent need for heritage conservation in Punjab to be based on the understanding that heritage is a critical part of the people's lives. It is equally important to recognize the values that need to be protected in the conservation and revitalization of heritage buildings and sites. "Localization" of heritage needs to be central to the planning process, the execution, and the final outcome.

References and Further Readings

UMASS Amherst Centre for Heritage & Society: www.umass.edu/chs/about/whatisheritage.html

SIKH ARCHITECTURE

Jaspreet Kaur

Introduction

Across time and space, communities bound by geographical, ideological, lingual, and spiritual paths have time and again created physical institutions to represent their collective consciousness. William Lethaby stated, “Architecture is the matrix of civilisation” (Brown 2014 [1956]a: 1). This matrix consists of cultural and political layers shaped into a designed structure that is both, functional as well as intellectually satisfying. The verdant landscape of Punjab has been the cradle of civilization of the subcontinent. Beginning with the Indus Valley civilization and the Vedic times, it has been the frontier of many empires. For centuries it featured on the important trade routes and consequently regularly plundered by invaders. It was traversed by men of religion: Sufi saints, *jogis*, and the Sikh Gurus. Punjab is the birthplace of the Sikh traditions and religion, and the rise of the Lahore Darbar under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) heralded one of the greatest empires of the world.

The architecture of Punjab, today, is the result of an intricate mix of cultures that came by way of trade, religion, and the invasions. These include Buddhist stupas, mosques, shrines, forts, temples, gurdwaras, *baolis*, and several other civic structures built during different reigns. In the nineteenth century, India was still a place where people did not define themselves primarily through their faith. The affiliations were regional and linguistic. Within the Indic cultural environment “there was always considerable ambiguity and fluidity when it came to religious identities” (Oberoi 1994: 24).

Edward Said’s lament of the goals of the Orientalist to codify and label is best exemplified in the works of James Ferguson and Percy Brown (Vandal and Vandal 2006: 27). They were the first to document Indian architecture, in the nineteenth century. Though they prepared a very comprehensive study of buildings across the subcontinent, they tried to label the architecture not stylistically like in Europe, but in the simplistic religious binary of Hindu and Muslim, thereby ignoring variations in culture, traditions, and geography. In this attempt of dividing the architecture into two distinct styles, they missed “capturing the special quality of the 14th–17th century – the cosmopolitanism in architecture – when rich and powerful rulers, irrespective of religion, engaged skilled artisans and engineers from across south and west Asia to design beautiful public spaces” (Gupta 2020).

Brown introduced architecture of India for its “spiritual content,” as “mind materialized in terms of rock, brick or stone,” as compared to “refined perfection” of the Greeks, passionate energy of the “French Gothic,” and “scholarship” of the Italian Renaissance (Brown 2014 [1956]a: 1–65).

The second volume is entirely on “Islamic Architecture.” A brief mention of *Harimandir Sahib* is included in the provincial styles of declining Mughal period.

The idea of “Sikh Architecture” too stems from this religion-oriented division of architecture in the subcontinent. History of Sikh religion, beginning with Guru Nanak, runs almost parallel to Mughal history beginning with Babur.

William Lethaby simultaneously puts forward two contradictory propositions on architecture: one is that all design is informed by universal principles and the other is that it is a continuous response to changing conditions. The religious architectural buildings of India have been a response to universal or canonical principles, geographical locations, and changing conditions of tradition and culture. As in “Sikh Art,” the architecture evolved from prevalent regional styles of both Hindu and Islamic traditions.

Almost every architectural structure addresses cultural identity and philosophy within a physical context. One of the youngest religions of the world, Sikhism derives its inspiration from a living spiritual and historical tradition. Guru Nanak’s message went beyond what was taught in the Islamic, the Brahminical, and the *jogi* traditions. He evolved his own school of thought that was “crystallised” during the time of the first five Gurus and, at the same time, gave rise to a distinct institution – the *dharamsal* (Singh P. 2001: 69–92).

The Sikh community had spread beyond the then geographical boundaries of Punjab, “past Delhi and up to Bengal,” writes Jean-Marie Lafont (Taylor and Dhami 2021: 138). Followers of Guru Nanak, or the *Nanak-panthis*, grew as a community far and wide, besides the length and breadth of India, Tibet, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.

The period from 1799 to 1849 is commonly referred to as the “Sikh Kingdom,” or *Khalsa Raj*. J.S. Grewal writes that it was Khuswant Singh who popularized the view that Ranjit Singh ruled in the name of the Khalsa, using the term “*Sarkar Khalsa*” for his government. Grewal clarifies that the term “*Sarkar Khalsa*” has been interpreted as the “government of Khalsa,” however, the term “*Singh Sahib*” was used in the eighteenth century for the individual Singh. He did not wear a crown or take the throne, ruled in the name of the *Khalsa*, and had a secular and cosmopolitan outlook. The idea of secularism in the subcontinent though has been more akin to pluralism (Grewal 2007: 183).

Evolution of the Sikh Architecture

Architecture can be broadly categorized as religious and nonreligious. While the former includes all religious constructions, the latter includes forts, palaces, civic institutions, and residential structures. The functions of each religion vary, all of which change with evolution of traditions and cultural patterns.

While no evidences of nonreligious buildings of the Guru period exist, several examples of such buildings from the *Misl* period and from Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s rule do. These include the intricately carved timber houses of Lahore, Amritsar and Chiniot, the forts and *havellis*. *Sheesh mahals* – palaces decorated with mirrorwork and frescoes were a regular feature in Mughal and Rajasthani forts – can be seen in several structures that include Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Samadhi complex, his interventions in the Lahore Fort, the interiors of Nabha Fort, and Qila Mubarak in Patiala. Frescoes exhibited both Sikh and Hindu themes by artists of various schools flourishing at this time.

The earliest provincial style emerges in Punjab, as this was the region where influences of Central Asia and Persia were first seen through two principal centers: Multan and Lahore. While Multan came under Arab influence early and was later associated with Southern Persia, Lahore came under Persian influence at a later time, through what is now Afghanistan (Brown 2014 [1956]b:32). There

was an influx of craftsmen from the surrounding regions of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Kashmir, Kangra, and even Bengal.

Much of the early construction, of which not much has survived, was in timber from the *ber* tree (jujube), which is now a rarity. The pre-medieval and medieval architecture of Punjab was constructed mainly in brick, as the land, being a rich alluvial plain, provided brick of excellent quality. The bricks made at the time were broader and thinner – now identified as *Lakhori* or *Nanakshahi* brick. The external woodwork had a distinctive style, which can be seen in Lahore, Multan, Chiniot, and Amritsar. Chiniot was renowned for carpentry skills, which were seen in several havelis. It is believed that the architect of the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, was from Chiniot as also builders for the Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore and Taj Mahal in Agra (Arshi 1986: 91).

One of the finest examples of the period is the Nau Nihal Singh Haveli, now the Victoria School or Government School for Girls, Lahore. It was built around 1830 or 1840 for Nau Nihal Singh, by his grandfather, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The haveli is profusely decorated with frescoes in the Kangra style and several features that display East Asian influences. The winged humans resemble both Islamic descriptions of angels but also reflect influences of the mythical Hindu *garuda*. The base of the dome is decorated with a serpent-like figure which echoes the Hindu snake god Naga (Post 2020).

Another marvellous *haveli*, with exquisite craftsmanship and frescoes is the Bedi Haveli at Kallar Syedan, Pakistan (Singh A. 2016: 261).

At the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Mughal Empire had declined. Artists and craftsmen from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bengal, Mewar, and Kangra moved to regions where patronage was available as in Awadh and Punjab, especially under Maharaja Ranjit Singh from 1799 to 1839. It is likely that these artists, after the decline of the Lahore Darbar and annexation of Punjab by the British, found patronage under Maharajas of Patiala and Kapurthala. Maharaja Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala was known for his “immense culture and open mindedness.” Two buildings constructed by him are known till today for their architectural splendor: the *Jaulakhana* or the Jagatjit Palace (Versailles of the Punjab), now the Sainik School, and the Moorish Mosque on the model of the Marrakech Mosque (Taylor and Dhami 2021: 161–162).

The richness and variety of decoration reveal a completely forgotten fact: that the inhabitants of Punjab under “native” rule were much more educated and cultured than what English historiography has led us to believe. This is why they created the Mayo College of Arts (renamed National College of Arts, Lahore), built by John Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard Kipling, in 1875 (Ibid., 149 and 155).

Bhai Ram Singh, tutored by Lockwood Kipling at the Mayo College of Arts, designed some of the most architecturally acclaimed buildings, such as the Khalsa College, Amritsar, and the buildings of Mayo College. Most of his work fits under the style of Indo-Saracenic architecture, of which he was the most significant Indian architect. Many of his commissions were built by the leading contractor Sir Ganga Ram.

“The architectural style adopted by the Sikhs,” writes Percy Brown,

while in appearance, of Mughal extraction, as a result of adaptations combined with elaborations, presents a certain character of its own, not, however, difficult to identify. Among its typical features are the multiplicity of *chhatris* or kiosks which ornament the parapets, angles and every prominence or projection; the invariable use of the fluted dome generally covered with brass or copper gilt; the frequent introduction of oriel windows (*jharokhas* – protruded arched window) with shallow elliptical cornices and supported on brackets, and the

enrichment of all arches by means of numerous foliations. . . . Buildings of this kind are to be found in many towns of the Punjab, but the principal example is the celebrated Golden Temple at Amritsar, a monument in which all the characteristics of the style are fully represented.

(Brown 2014 [1956]b: 114)

Religious Architecture

While examples of nonreligious buildings abound, as with most other religions, especially of the subcontinent, the history of architecture is concerned more with religious buildings than with any other type because the universal appeal of religion made the religious structures the most expressive, the most permanent, and the most influential buildings in any community.

Most studies of Sikh Architecture are limited to the study of gurdwaras, beginning with the “Divine Court” or Darbar sahib (present-day Golden Temple), being the chief pilgrimage center around which revolved the major currents of the religion. It was also the first designed and built gurdwara. Though, many nonreligious buildings perhaps give a better understanding of architecture of the time. P.S. Arshi’s study is also limited to the study of gurdwaras within the geography of East Punjab. He writes as follows:

By Sikh Architecture what has been meant is precisely the religious buildings of the faith. In other words, these buildings which have served the religious-ritualistic and devotional-functions of the Sikh community. This has amounted to the study of architecture of the buildings known as the *Gurudwaras*.

(Arshi 1986: ix)

Architecture of Darbar Sahib, Amritsar

In order to understand the precedent of the gurdwara design, we need to understand its religious building precedents. The history of the Golden Temple is, in a way, the capsuled history of Sikhs (Kaur 1983: 1).

From historical surveys it is evident that *Darbar Sahib* was constructed and reconstructed several times. The present building was completed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, although its interior decoration continued long after his death. It is evident from *Darbar Sahib*’s architecture that several of its features viewed in isolation have a resemblance to those of various buildings of the Mughals and the Rajputs.

It is possible that the pool at Thatte Khera, near Tarn Taran, built by Guru Arjan in a Mughal idiom, may provide clues to the original structure of the Darbar Sahib, which was probably a double-storied building topped with a dome, made up of burned brick and lime (Singh P. 2006: 166).

The foundation of the *Darbar Sahib*, as an architectural prototype combining the *dharamsal* and the tank, was laid in 1588 by Guru Arjan Dev (according to another tradition laying of the foundation is attributed to Hazrat Mian Mir of Lahore), the fifth Guru in the pool constructed by Guru Ram Das. The building is placed on a square platform in the center of an almost square *sarovar*.

The power of the sacred *sarovar* or the *baoli* (step-well) was known to Guru Amar Das, as a place that attracted large number of people on annual festivals of Baisakhi and Diwali. Stepwells are most common in western India and are also found in the other more arid regions of the subcontinent. The construction of stepwells is mainly utilitarian, to cope with seasonal fluctuations in water availability, though they may include embellishments of architectural significance and are also temple tanks. Both religious and political leaders used to undertake the construction of step-wells and pools

for the public good (Ibid., 154). The *sarovar* was a continuation of the Hindu ritual bath tradition, as also the ritual of ablution in a mosque.

The idea of placing a monument in the middle of a water body was not uncommon in India, as instances of this being done by each of the large religious communities exist (Brown 2014 [1956] b: 114).

The preexisting low-lying area with a small pond near the *Dukh Bhanjani Beri* (jujube tree) was enlarged with “ceremonial excavations,” which then served as a sacred tank or the pool of Nectar – *Amrit-sar* or “Lake of Immortality,” and with the emergence of *Harimandir*, Amritsar attained the status of a great holy place (Kaur 1983: 13).

The city came to be known as Ramdasapur, which later came to be known as Amritsar, “in view of the growing importance and sanctity of the ‘pond’ located at the place” (Arshi 1986: 87). A large number of traders and businessmen from the neighboring areas were induced to settle in the new township. In due course a market, called *Guru Ka Bazar*, also sprang up there (Kaur 1983: 7).

The city of Amritsar thus grew to be not just as a place of politico-religious importance and pilgrimage but also as an important trading center. A combination of “City of Faith” and “Merchant City,” as defined by Kevin Lynch in his book *A Theory of Good City Form*. Pritam Singh writes as follows:

The dialectic of spirituality and economic in the Golden Temple articulates through the site acting as a place of pilgrimage while also being at the historical center of the economic hub of the city of Amritsar. This is not coincidental, but rather exhibits the embeddedness of the material and spiritual in the inception of the plans to ensure that the shrine was protected at the onset and bolstered by local business families who settled and traded around the Golden Temple.

(Rai and Rai 2021: 88)

The Sarovar continued to be *kucha* till Guru Arjan Dev made it *pucca* with bricks on all four sides with steps. Guru Arjan equated bathing in this *sarovar* as equivalent to bathing in 68 places of pilgrimage in India. Added to this was the “spiritual cleansing” by way of listening to the continuous singing of the Guru’s hymns. This was enhanced due to the presence of the *Darbar Sahib* in the middle of the *sarovar*. “As the lotus flower remained dry in the water, so *Harimandir* gave the message of living creatively in the world without being affected by its temptations” (Singh P. 2006: 165). The sanctum is connected to the platform by a causeway and the gateway into this causeway is called the *Darshani Deorhi* (Figures 30.1 & 30.2). The substructure of Darbar Sahib and, causeway that connects it, has been built on numerous vaulted tunnels, with the inner aqueducts being lower than the outer ones. There are 52 aqueducts, which represent the essence of Guru Arjan’s composition *Bavan Akhari* (52 letters) (Ibid., 164).

The marbled *parikarma*, or the circumambulatory passage of the *sarovar* is, covered by the colonnaded veranda, beyond which are the residential quarters of *granthis* and *sewadars*. The colonnade and the entrance gateways seem to be later additions. From some of the paintings available, especially of William Carpenter, it is clear that although the Sarovar has a defined boundary, the precinct has many *bungas* and trees and is also approachable from several sides. All entrances to the precinct have now been closed except four. The main entrance is on the erstwhile clock tower side, the second on the south, that is, Guru Ram Das Sarai. The third on west near the Sikh Reference library and the fourth on Akal Takht side.

The *Darbar Sahib* is a three-story square building on a square platform, with an additional two-storied building of half-hexagon shape appended to the back. The central hall is a square with



Figure 30.1 View of Darbar Sahib, Darshani Deori, and Akal Takht, Amritsar.

Source: Photo by Jaspreet Kaur



Figure 30.2 View of Darbar Sahib and Causeway, Amritsar.

Source: Photo by Jaspreet Kaur

half-octagon appended to it, leading to the *Har ki Pauri*. The architectural features of *Darbar Sahib* include the multiple fluted domes and foliated, ogee arches, multiple *chhatris*, elliptical eaves with multifoil soffits; jharokhas or balcony windows supported on brackets; walls enriched with arches and ceilings with various forms of mural art. The front of the building, which faces the bridge, is decorated with repeated cusped arches. This is a double height space with the first floor overlooking the lower level, enclosed by railing on all sides, and exactly on top of the central hall of the main sanctuary is the third story. It is a small square room with three gates. A regular recitation of *Guru Granth Sahib* is held there. This space is covered by the main fluted dome with lotus petal motif at the base and inverted lotus at the top, which supports the “*Kalash*” with a “*Chhatri*” at the end (Figure 30.3). The main shrine is connected to the *Har ki Pauri*, and these two spaces merge into a single continuous space at the first floor.

The *sheesh mahal*, or mirror room, in the pavilion of the second story of *Darbar Sahib* shows the most beautiful parts of *naqqashi*. The area on the first floor above the *Har ki Pauri* is a richly decorated chamber, and a handwritten *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed here. The walls are decorated with floral designs, and its arches are ornamented with verses from the *Granth Sahib* in letters of gold. This seems to be an imitation of the Muslim practice of engraving verses from the holy Quran. The *jaratkari* reminds of the *pietra dure* tradition, similar to Mughal technique used for decoration of the Taj Mahal, but also has human and animal figures in addition to the floral designs (Kaur 1983: 181).

The complex programs of the Sikh religion and traditions, as with all religions, made the *Darbar Sahib* the focus of varied buildings demanding architectural solutions. These include organized practice of religion, political discourse, *langar*, education, and other scholarly functions. In the course of time, the *Darbar Sahib* and the *sarovar* became the focus of a complex of buildings, including the Akal Takht in the vicinity, most of which repeat in their architectural details the



Figure 30.3 A close-up view of gilded domes and chhatri of Darbar Sahib.

Source: Photo by Jaspreet Kaur.

characteristics of the central structure. The *Darbar Sahib* was reconstructed during 1764–1776, under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, supervised by Des Raj. Some major changes were perhaps finally made by Maharaja Ranjit Singh between 1802 and 1839, though it is not clear whether he built it from scratch or followed the basic architectural layout and features of the preceding building of the temple at the same site (Arshi 1986: 91). The *Darbar Sahib* got the name *Swaran Mandir* (Golden Temple) when its upper part was covered with gold-plated copper sheets during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Guru Arjan Dev organized and compiled the messages and sayings of all the preceding Gurus and Saints into the *Adi Granth* (“original Book”). This was to be enshrined in the “temple,” the foundations of which were laid in 1588. The *Adi Granth* was completed in 1604 CE. The period of construction of the *Darbar Sahib* can, therefore, be conjectured as somewhere between 1588 and 1604. It was destroyed several times by Ahmad Shah Abdali. It is said that the last destruction was by gunpowder, which would have impacted the super-structure, leaving the foundations intact. The construction period and additions, if any, can be understood through a detailed study and carbon dating of the foundation structure.

What is known is that Guru Arjan Dev provided for 4 doors in each direction signifying unrestricted entry to people from all four sides irrespective of their caste, as also to “proclaim the omnipresence of the *Adi Granth*” (Arshi 1986: 94). It is believed that he constructed the temple at a lower level, where devotees had to step down to reach the sanctum, in humility, to pray. The entry from the clock tower side is about 12 steps below the outside level, and the opposite side’s entry is about 5 steps below.

The building of the tank at the then existing natural level is a reflection of the basic tenant of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in sustaining creation. The Sikh Gurus emphasize the oneness of humanity and the oneness of creation. Guru Nanak laid the foundation for a sacred vision for the environment: “Air is teacher, water, the father and Earth, the great mother” (GGS 8).

The subsequent gurdwaras, however, are mostly built on a higher plinth, barring a few earlier ones, as documented by P.S. Arshi, which have a lower ground or a basement to house the *Granth Sahib*. Also, although the *sarovar* is a recurring feature in several gurdwaras, all others are built on the edge of the *sarovar*, as at Tarn Taran, Kaulsar, Santokhsar, and Bibeksar.

As many of us, who visited *Darbar Sahib* in the pre-1984 period recall, one could walk in and out of the precinct *parikarma*, connected with the surrounding spaces, as part of their daily routine, making *Darbar Sahib* easily accessible, at all times of the day.

Over the years, *Darbar Sahib* has become one of the most visited places by tourists across the world, as awarded by World Book of Records (WBR) Introduction of the *Galiara* in 1988, and the heritage street enclosed by the imposing red stone facades resemble the forts of Agra and Rajasthan. The scale of unshaded paved spaces with statues located as markers, are modelled on European public plazas and squares. The Golden Temple precinct is now a tourist place to be visited rather than a space to walk through in reverence.

Nirupama Dutt aptly describes the new intervention, designed by Jaipur-based architect Anup Bartaria, in her article in *Hindustan Times*, “Amritsar’s makeover: Golden Grandeur with a Heritage Tinge”: “The long stretch from Town Hall to Jallianwala Bagh has nothing of the old familiar bustle. For a moment, one wonders if it is our old ‘Ambarsar’ or a newly renovated heritage palace from the Pink City of Jaipur” (Dutt 2016).

This in essence is the complete reversal of what Sumail Singh Sidhu explains as the Sikh tradition, deeply rooted in its inclusive vernacular, of its landscape, folk art, language, its *qisas*, and poetry. Guru Arjan Dev, in making *Darbar Sahib* accessible to all, initiated a concept opposite to the classical

traditions of the enclosed, inaccessible sanctum space of the Hindu temples. Though *Darbar Sahib* still stands as a testimony to this concept, the surrounding areas have been urbanized to the extent of being alien to the urban contexts of the Punjab plains.

Several authors, such as Madanjit Kaur, have attempted to relate the spatio-physical geometry of *Darbar Sahib*, hermeneutically with the interpretation of Sikh scriptures, which again do not offer any explanations for subsequent gurdwara buildings. They have tried to relate the interior of the *Darbar Sahib*, that is, the structural division of the square geometry to support the upper gallery and the dome, to “Sikh concept of spiritual journey through five stages,” as presented in the *Japuji*, that is, the *Khands*. These are the realms or spiritual state of *Sachh*, as the center, four corners being Karam, Gian, Saram, and Dharam.

S.S. Bhatti states that the concept and design of *Sri Harmandir Sahib* lies in the sacred scripture the Bani of Guru Nanak (Bhatti 2011: 43–48). Gurmeet S. Rai writes about the “coincidence” of the direction to which *Har ki Pauri* faces and that of *Har ki Pauri* at Haridwar being the same (Rai and Rai 2021: 59). However, no further explanation is given. *Har ki Pauri* at Haridwar is located on the West bank of River Ganga, as are *ghats* of Varanasi and other places. A Hindu temple deity canonically has to face the rising sun, that is, the east (as did the reek, Egyptian, Syrian, and Persian temples – the axis through the open door was directed to the point of some rising star [Lethaby 1892: 56–57]) and hence is located on the western banks of the river. Whereas, the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the *Darbar Sahib* faces the direction of the original entry to the gurdwara, which is next to the Akal Takht, the path leading from gurdwara *Guru ke Mahal*. It is a well-understood fact of Sikh religion that the position of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the gurdwara is not direction specific and is generally oriented towards the gurdwara entry. For example, the gurdwara entry at Dera Baba Nanak changed from city side to the opposite side and so also the positioning of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Whereas *Har* is the most oft repeated word in *Guru Granth Sahib*, the closest meaning being pervading everywhere, Harjinder Singh Dilgeer, in this specific context states that the *Har ki Pauri* name was given by Nirmalas when they took over the management of *Darbar Sahib* in the eighteenth century (Dilgeer 2021: 1638).

Evolution of the Gurdwara

To understand *Darbar Sahib* and the precedents of gurdwara design, it is important to know about the cultural context, religious doctrines, and prevalent traditions. The Sikh religion strictly commands believers on worshipping the Divine in the form of *Shabad*. Guru Nanak initiated the institution of the *Sangat* (community prayers) and the *Pangat* (community *langars*, irrespective of religion, caste or creed). *Dharamsal* (“hospice,” here the “Sikh place of worship”) as a Sikh institution is the precursor of the gurdwara. *Dharamsals* were established in far-flung places, in the wake of Guru Nanak’s extensive travels. Guru Nanak gave a concrete expression to his ideas of “unity, equality and fraternity” (Singh Verma Ghai and Singh 1999: 135) by holding at these centers *sangat* and *pangat* and *kirtan*. The *dharamsal* represented the idea of *seva*, a highly prized virtue in the Sikh tradition. It, therefore, was a concept intrinsic to the Sikh identity and was institutionalized as the gurdwara, after installation of the sacred scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*, from the seventeenth century onwards, which then developed over a period of time as a building that was both religious and social. The gurdwara was deeply rooted in the local community space, around which a village or town would grow, as was the case with Kartarpur, Khadur Sahib, Goindwal, and Amritsar. Gurdwaras where the Gurus themselves were present became primary places of pilgrimage, and others were related to their associations with the Gurus or important events.

Sikh Shrines in India and Pakistan

Since the 1990s, Sikh shrines in India and Pakistan have become sites of organized pilgrim tours. This change is in part reflective of the broader trends in global tourism in which sacred spaces have become the destination of mass pilgrimages. It is also the result of sustained private initiatives by local religious leaders who command sizable congregations and have started the process of leading the faithful to rediscover a lost heritage (Singh G. 2019). A few recent publications have brought about increased awareness on Sikh legacy in Pakistan. Amardeep Singh, in his two books – *Lost Heritage* and *The Quest Continues* – extensively covers gurdwaras and other buildings of the Sikh period in West Punjab. “The Sikh Heritage – Beyond Borders” by Dalvir Pannu is another document on the buildings of West Punjab.

These documented buildings perhaps give us a better idea of the earlier gurdwara, as almost all the gurdwara buildings on the eastern side of the border have been reconstructed, some multiple times, to the now familiar white marble cladded and domed buildings, which seem to have received their “distinctive and uniform Sikh character” by the “consolidated control” of the gurdwaras by SGPC post the Gurdwara Act of 1925 (Singh and Barrier 2001: 103). The extensive use of marble on the floors makes it almost impossible to walk in the hot Indian summer and the near freezing winter months, and precariously dangerous during monsoon, despite the jute runners laid out.

However, several gurdwaras even in Pakistan, especially the ones of historical importance to the Sikh world have seen changes in façade, additional buildings, and surrounding landscape. The recent completion of *Darbar Sahib* at Kartarpur and the subsequent opening of the Kartarpur corridor, as the “bridge of peace” is one such example (Singh G. 2019).

The Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur

The development of the *Darbar Sahib* at Kartarpur was an opportunity to develop the gurdwara and its surrounds in keeping with the vernacular idiom of Sikh traditions and of Guru Nanak in particular. Guru Nanak lived here for the last years of his life after his extensive travels of over 15 years.

The gurdwara at Kartarpur, Narowal, was established in early 1500s on the west bank of the Ravi River. The changing course of the river eventually formed a new habitation on the east bank representing the present-day Dera Baba Nanak. The Radcliffe Line of India’s partition in 1947, awarded the Shakargarh tehsil on the west bank, including Kartarpur to Pakistan and the Gurdaspur tehsil, with Dera Baba Nanak to India.

Guru Nanak names his final resting place “Kartarpur,” as Creator’s abode where all are equal, and where he preached “*kirt karo, nam japo, vand chhako* (work, worship and share)” as the path to liberation. It was neither a monastic order involved in ascetic life, nor any Sufi *khanqah* established on revenue free land (*madad-i-mash*) granted by rulers. With his organizational skills, Guru Nanak was able to establish the *Begampura* (“city of joy”), unlike other poet-saints, like Ravidas (Singh P. 2006: 153).

The gurdwara at Kartarpur is a square plan with corner towers, similar to Safdrjung’s tomb in Delhi and Fatehgarh Sahib, Anandpur. The central chamber topped with bulbous, fluted dome is finished with an inverted lotus and *kalasa* finial and a domed kiosk on all four sides. The difference in the façade treatment comes from the more perforated façade at Kartarpur with seven arched openings at both levels versus the openings of *Darbar Sahib*, Amritsar, with central triptych windows on upper level and *jharokhas* on either side. The main shrine building, at Kartarpur, was built in 1925 at a cost of Rs. 1,35,600, donated by Sardar Bhupindar Singh, the Maharaja of Patiala.

PM Imran Khan aptly called it the “Mecca of the Sikhs.” When the project was announced, it included the renovation of the gurdwara and addition of tourist facilities such as a five-star

hotel. While these are yet to be built, the entire space around the gurdwara has been marbleized (Figure 30.4) with an arched colonnade all around and a *sarovar* at one end. This is likely to disturb the earlier ecosystem of the former serene spot surrounded by forests and organic farming.

Gurdwara Architecture and Symbolism

The architectural layout of *Darbar Sahib*, Amritsar, as well as of *Darbar Sahib*, Kartarpur, and as subsequently followed by other gurdwaras is generally a square (or rectangle, at times an octagon) plan topped with a dome. Both, though different in their façade treatment and other architectural elements, are symmetrical along both axis.

Lethaby states that architectural symbolism and shapes stem from similar needs and desires of men, necessities imposed by materials, and on nature-inspired style (Lethaby 1892: 3). The architectural plan communicates symbolism – the circle, as a suggestion of planets or the cosmos, the square as the earth, as imagined by the early man – the earth is a flat plain surrounded by the sea, and the sky, the dome, forms a roof on which the sun, moon, and stars travel.

The square also represents four seasons, four directions, or the four elements. Squares are also seen as firm foundations, both literally and metaphorically. They encourage stability and permanence.

In elevation, the most consistent symbolic forms have been the gateway, the dome, the tower, the stairway, and the colonnade. The symbolic meaning of the dome has developed over millennia. It may have a common root in the use of the domed hut, a shape that was translated into tombs and associated with celestial heavens. Persian poets often called the sky “the azure-coloured dome.”



Figure 30.4 Front view of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib at Kartarpur, Pakistan, showing the recently completed marble façade and surroundings.

Source: Photo by Akshay Kaul



Figure 30.5 An aerial view of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur, Pakistan.

Source: Photo by Nasr Rahman

From early on in the West, Central, and Southwest Asia, it was a popular method of roofing in places where there was no timber. It was easy to build using mud bricks that either tilted slightly inwards or by placing layers of brick in circles that gradually became smaller. The wide variety of dome forms in medieval Islam reflected dynastic, religious, and social differences as much as practical building considerations.

The most significant accomplishment of the sixteenth to seventeenth century was the distinct bulbous domes, which are considered as the last generation of Persian domes. Such domes, also known as the onion domes, are often larger in diameter than the tholobate upon which they sit, and their height usually exceeds their width. These bulbous structures taper smoothly to a point.

These exerted great influence on architectural styles of Islamic domes, especially in the late Mughal period in India. The ribbed bulbous domes have come to become one of the main architectural features of present-day gurdwaras.

Another prominent feature of gurdwara buildings is the use of the arch, usually as a cusped and multifoil arch. The arch was introduced by the Turks in the 1280s, however, due to the local craftsmen not believing in its structural strength, for several years it continued to be a combination of corbelling (a system of reducing spans by projecting stones) and arch-shapes. The dome gets introduced around the same time and gets an inverted lotus and *kalasa* as its finial, different from the finial (*alem*) of the mosque, which ends with the crescent

The most commonly used sacred symbols of purity, the Lotus and the *kalasa*, a symbol of source of life (mango leaves and coconut), are found in almost all buildings of that period on pillars, beams, arches and domes, including gurdwaras.

The lotus flower also finds mention in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Bhai Gurdas uses it as an analogy for how to live life: “In the pure, immaculate waters, both the lotus and the slimy scum are found. The lotus flower is with the scum and the water, but it remains untouched by any pollution” (GGS: 990).

Way Forward

Certain forms and shapes, through long association with religious rites, became sacred and were preserved and reproduced for their symbolic value. These forms continued to be understood even though they were often stylized into abstract or geometric patterns. People have generally tended to resist change; they find it reassuring to be surrounded by known and familiar forms. Reproducing them as ornament on newly introduced forms provides an association and a “satisfying sense of continuity between the past and the present” (Lethaby 1892: 2).

It’s a similar resistance and inertia that seems to be a factor in the current ways of constructing the gurdwaras, clad in white marble or tiles, which have continued to use the fluted bulbous dome, albeit just for ornamentation or perhaps as a skyline marker, the arches, and the triptych openings remain as standard design elements for the gurdwaras.

Sikh religion is a pluralistic world religion (*sarbat da bhala*) and not a Sikh nation. As McLeod explains, Sikh “*qaum*” (Arabic and later Punjabi usage: “a people who stand together”) is not the same as the Western concept of a nation. Sikh identity, is constantly evolving the world over, with basic tenets in place (Singh and Barrier 2001: 137).

The architecture of the gurdwaras needs this evolving impetus, keeping the idea of the gurdwara as a place of *sangat*, *kirtan*, and *pangat* intact. The insignia of the gurdwara, the Nishan Sahib, visually announces the presence of a gurdwara. The dome, arch and white marble, are not essential to the identity. There exists some excellent examples of historical gurdwaras built in different styles. One such example is the Bhai Karam Singh Gurdwara in Jhelum City, Pakistan, with a central courtyard, exquisite Kashmiri woodwork and Belgian glass, and the Mansera Gurdwara (Singh A. 2016: 236–274) built in 1935 in Baroque style. The gate to Rori Sahib gurdwara being another example of innovative design by the “Gaudis of Punjab” (Ibid., 361).

Architecture is also strongly influenced by time and space, availability of materials in a region, and construction technology and needs to evolve with time. This, however, does not imply the destruction of built cultural heritage, which may also lead to destruction of intangible cultural heritage.

The way forward is to create fresh, new architectural forms to accommodate the time-honored religious and social functions of the gurdwara. With this more creative and flexible approach towards gurdwara typology (as also seen world over in contemporary interpretations of other religious buildings), architects can embrace the expressive potential of contemporary building technologies, just as their predecessors pushed the limits of masonry construction.

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PART VII

Citizenship, Sovereignty, and the Nation-State



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SOCIOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF SIKH PHILOSOPHY

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair

What Is Sikh Philosophy?

Sikh philosophy is a field of knowledge, specifically a subfield of world philosophies (itself a branch of mainstream philosophy) which examines the concepts, practices, arguments and worldviews pertaining to the spiritual-political movement known as *Sikhi*(sm). The Sikh movement was founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, developed by succession of nine living spiritual masters who also took the title “Nanak” and the canonization of a body of original poetic writings in the form of an authoritative text: the Guru Granth Sahib.

Although Sikh philosophy is popularly considered an indigenous (Sikh) system of thought traceable to the original intentions and life practices developed by Nanak, Sikh philosophy is in fact a composite term which first emerged in the context of colonial period encounters and interactions between categories and concepts of Sikh and Western thought. More specifically, Sikh philosophy emerged as a consequence of, and in relation to, the translation and reconfiguration of an axial term in the Sikh lexicon: *gurmat* (lit. the logic or teaching of the Guru) into the European knowledge system. It is therefore more helpful to think of Sikh philosophy as an “assemblage” (in the sense coined by Deleuze and Guattari) rather than an autochthonic thought-form. The fact that the colonial knowledge system initially classified *Sikhi* as a religion (hence *Sikhism*) as rooted in Punjabi culture and history, with no discernible philosophical thought system, can be seen as part of the colonial state’s epistemic technology combined with secular statecraft and governance of colonized populations. Once classified as “essentially religious” the Sikh life world and Sikhs themselves not only lost any legal claim to statehood and the exercise of physical violence within a particular territory, even the axial term *gurmat* (indicating the central teaching and praxial logic) lost its designation as an independent thought system. The indigenous categories *sikhi* and *gurmat* were now placed into a colonial cartography of “world religions” whose essential logic was determined by Protestant Christianity.

Although Sikh elites internalized this classification of “*gurmat* as a religion” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their interpretive efforts nevertheless managed to keep alive indigenous traditions of reflective thought-praxis such as *gurmat vichar* or *gurbani vichar*, as well as mnemo-praxial techniques such as *nam simaran*. By the early decades of the twentieth century Sikh scholars began to interpret the indigenous Sikh traditions of reflection, reflective engagement with

self and world, along with its key concepts, within the framework of European philosophy. As a result, the two discursive traditions – the Indic “*gurmat*” and European “philosophy” – were synthesized into a new intellectual discourse known as “Sikh Philosophy” (also referred to as “Philosophy of Sikhism” although this carries a somewhat different connotation) with its own distinct body of literature composed in English and modern Punjabi idiom.

As a new field of knowledge, the broad task of Sikh philosophy was to identify key Sikh concepts and enable engagements and encounters of Sikh concepts with the outside world. Thus from the very outset, the assemblage Sikh philosophy never followed the conventional disinterested, impartial stance of normative philosophy and social theory whose mode of inquiry followed a transcendental mode of knowing achieved through a “separation of oneself and the world in the act of knowing” (Kirloskar-Steinback 2021 p. 35). Rather the epistemic stance of Sikh philosophy was, and has continued, to co-implicate the self in a deep entanglement with other selves and with the world as its practitioners attempt to understand it. In other words, Sikh philosophy’s epistemic stance was not only imbricated in social practice but in the process of making connections to the world. What makes this possible is the nature of its key concepts, specifically the performative aspect of these concepts, the capacity to make things happen in the world, to change the world in positive ways. The fundamental concepts of Sikh philosophy operate in such a way that they not only *represent* objects, propositions, or facts about Sikh tradition but are practically engaged and entangled with the world. Consequently, Sikh philosophy not only deals with “embodied aspects of experience,” which instigate changes in the knowing subject itself, but engages in “relational knowing,” which implies an orientation towards other selves, societies, and the world, in ways that is able to simultaneously associate subject and object (see Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson 2021). One consequence of this stance is that ontology and epistemology are inseparable in Sikh philosophy. To see how this works, it will be helpful to provide a brief overview of a few axial concepts of *gurmat*, which contribute to the ontological and epistemological functions of Sikh philosophy.

Key Concepts and Metaphysics

The cornerstone of Sikh philosophy is a concept and practice of absolute Oneness indicated by the symbol *ik oankar*, which stands at the beginning of Sikh scripture, is repeated throughout its canonical texts, and is treated as a mnemo-praxical sermon by all Sikhs. To say that Oneness is *absolute* mean several things. First, that this is a oneness that brooks no opposition between the One (*ek*) and the Many (*anek*) – it is both simultaneously. Oneness is not quantifiable but is qualitative, a state of being in which multiplicity/plurality is always already fused with oneness from the outset. This non-oppositional logic of the One-Many (*ek-anek*) is the axial principle underpinning all existence and nonexistence, all matter and consciousness, and therefore all life, in such a way that matter and consciousness are part of a continuum of oneness. Secondly, to say “simultaneously” indicates a mode of time-being in which opposites or differences can coexist within this oneness. Such a oneness is logically consistent *if* we assume that the nature of time is not identical to itself, which is to say that time cannot be reduced to the passage of identical moments, which in Sikh philosophy is ordinary or everyday time as it is constructed by human mind – *kāl*. Rather, the true nature of time is more complicated and more usefully considered as an internal proliferation of difference. Time is constantly ongoing self-differentiation. According to *gurmat*, this infinitely expansive, measureless time that is untimely in its essence is referred to as *akāl* (see Mandair 2022b).

Conventional wisdom in Sikh studies scholarship has tended to translate *akāl* in theological-secular terms as arguably the most important attribute of the divine: immortality, eternity, immutability. As I have argued elsewhere, theological interpretations by and large followed trends in Christian

thought thereby reducing *akāl* (infinite, immeasurable, timeless time) into *kāl* (ordinary, chronological, human time), which has the characteristic of introducing space or spatial distancing into the experience of time. By reducing the experience and intuition of time to spatialized time (*kāl*), terms such as immortality and immutability end up being little more than attributes of an eminent deity which monotheistic traditions call “God” (Mandair 2009).

However, *akāl* strictly speaking does not refer to an objective time but to an infinitely expansive time-consciousness, an absolute awareness that is always becoming, always unfolding, and yet at the same time is interior, which is to say that it cannot be experienced or known from a distance, that is, from a position occupied by a mind that observes it externally. *Akāl* is therefore not a thing but an experiential awareness of oneness. Within this absolute state of awareness (*n̄*) there is no oppositionality, no enmity, no distance between subject and object.

Two important questions arise here. First, if the true nature of reality is oneness, and if the nature of this oneness is infinitely expansive, unchanging, measureless, etc., why are we not aware of this oneness during daily life? What prevents us from realizing this in the world that we live in or in the social contexts we inhabit? The answer according to Sikh philosophy lies in the way that our ego has been structured and conditioned by society since birth, but especially since the acquisition of language. This social-linguistic-symbolic conditioning limits the function and potential of the ego by forcing it to separate itself from itself, through a mode of individuation governed by the tendency to represent itself to itself only as an identity; in other words, its sense of reality begins with self-affirmation (*haui-mai* or I am myself) that fundamentally denies its own otherness; as a psychic entity it is stuck in a feedback loop that return-to-itself as sameness. From within the limited *kāl*-centric timeframe that we inhabit, we’re conditioned in such a way as to create a split within the field of consciousness (or oneness) by jettisoning what we deem to be not-self or other. This conventional form of individuation (*manmukh* = mind-facing individuality), which we believe constitutes normality, can interact with the world, with other selves, only via the dualism, the opposition, or the binary. From here on, what the conventional self understands as oneness is a form of individuation based on a drive towards self-identity.

Thus far, Sikh philosophy’s analysis of the ego/self is not too far removed from conventional humanism or from modern Western psychology in its Freudian, Lacanian, Kleinian, or related forms. Where it differs, and it does so radically, is in its relative attribution of value to ego and non-ego. In Western psychology a strong and stable ego is valued and through this valuation non-ego is devalued and effectively banished from waking-state consciousness that we’re accustomed to calling “reality.” In contradistinction, Sikh philosophy, as we shall see later in this chapter, values the *relation* between ego and non-ego. Reality disappears when we separate ego and non-ego; it opens up when we relate them.

This brings us to the second question. How is oneness to be *realized*, brought into effect? Here Sikh philosophy departs even more radically from conventional humanism. According to Sikh philosophy conventional ego needs to be radically transformed. Like other spiritual traditions *gurmāt* talks about transforming the conventional self-conscious ego by annihilating it and replacing it with a different psychic structure. The references to killing ego, annihilation, are not merely metaphorical. It refers to the self-effort required to tap into a reservoir of force/power immanent within life, tapping which it becomes possible to transform conventional processes of ego formation (*haumai*), *not* by literally killing the ego, but by reorienting the desire that makes it crave for the contracted egocentric state of consciousness, which society has conditioned us to desire in the first place. This ordinary, socially conditioned state is called *manmukh*. Terms such as “annihilation” or “killing” thus refer to the self-overcoming required to break our attachment to convention. And this self-overcoming is required to shift the axis of desire towards the aspect of the psyche that society forces

us to split-off and ultimately repress, namely, the non-ego, the outside world, the other, or the infinitely expanded reality of oneness.

In Sikh philosophy, the clearest indication of this psychic transformation of desire is registered through new and creative modes of aesthetic symbolization expressed variously through language and poetics, music, dance, and thought. The agent of this transformation is *śabda*, which literally means “word” or “language,” but in the context of Sikh philosophy refers to any and all kinds of *resonant vibration*. Simply stated, vibration or resonance refer to that which enables expressivity in, and connectivity to, the world, to other selves, beginning with a relinking of the self to its own self (or individuation) in a way that closes the split introduced by conventional social symbolization. Though rarely considered in this way, the idea of resonant vibration offers insight into the practical ends of Sikh thought, namely, the achievement of liberation in the stream of life (*jīvanmukti*) – which in fact is simply a way of saying the event of ego transformation described above liberates the self *not from* the self, or *from the world*, but rather liberates it to make new and more creative connections to the world. The key point to remember here is that *śabad* exerts an impersonal, unmediated agency, one that does not arise from a humanly engendered mediation but rather arises spontaneously when individuals follow the imperative (*hukam*) within all existence and all nonexistence and in all life. This imperative (*hukam*) can be tapped when the self dies to the Word, in other words, sacrifices itself to the Word.

Such references to sacrifice, surrender, dying are not mere metaphors. In fact, they have a practical counterpart in the performative meditative mnemo-praxis called *nam simaran*, a form of mindful practice that Sikhs are encouraged to imbibe into their daily lives. Although *nam simaran* is often literally translated as remembering or recalling *nam* by repeating the “Names of God,” there is a wider sense in which it refers to any process that helps transform the mind’s negative repetition-compulsions into a positive mode of repetition that enables it to actualize (or channel) *nam* within and through the body-mind complex. In Sikh philosophy, the favored techniques of *simaran* include vocalized rhythmic repetition and especially singing to the accompaniment of prescribed musical measures (*ragas*). The term *nam* refers to the vibration that underpins the eternal oneness of all existence and nonexistence. If this vibration-resonance is indicative of *process* or *becoming* exemplified by the opening of subjectivity to the world, the very same process is objectified by theology which solidifies *nam* into the Name of an eminent deity, for example, “God” (Mandair 2009). The meditative mnemo-praxis of *nam simaran* works against this objectifying tendency by symbolically performing a death-of-the-self in the very act of recalling or remembering *nam*. Through this mindful technique, one simultaneously surrenders, annihilates, and converts *haumai* (or individuation as self-attachment) into individuation as other attachment.

Relation, or Opening Self to the World

Ultimately, if the purpose of *nam simaran* is to open the self to the other, to the world, the process itself as well as its effects takes place not in some otherworldly, supernatural realm but in the time of this world. However, the temporality of such transformations cannot be reduced to secular time which would still be in some sense “transcendental” (in the Kantian/Hegelian sense). Rather this temporality I’m describing is immanent within sequential time. It penetrates and pervades ordinary time (*kāl*) and the ordinary self. To access it, however, the everyday sense of time and self has to be broken. This breaking requires a real and symbolic performative that connects self-death at the very moment that the self is generated. This self-death spontaneously breaks attachment towards sequential time-consciousness (*kāl*) and opens the self into an expanded, measureless time-consciousness (*akāl*). If one can achieve a balance (*sahaj*) between killing and regenerating the self, a balance

between living and dying, and weave this balance into the fabric of the self, this transformed self that emerges can no longer see itself as an objectifiable entity separated from other entities, selves, and worlds. As a form of individuation that liberates in the stream of one's life (*jivanmukt*), it is simultaneously form and formless, ego and non-ego, self and other. A clue to its ontological status can be seen in terms such as *anhad nad* or *anhad śabad* – uncaused, unpulsed or sourceless vibration, which is a reference to pure relation. Stated differently, the form of the self-transformed through *nam simaran* is pure relation to all that exists and all that doesn't exist.

The most evident mark of this self as pure relation is the change in its mode of expression. It expresses itself only through the form of poetics, melody, rhythm – all of which seem to be the best ways of expressing the paradoxical nature of its state: the self is neither thing nor no-thing. Its state of existence is between thingness and no-thingness, namely, pure resonance, pure vibration (*anhad śabad*, *anhad nad*), or more accurately, uncaused resonance unpulsed resonance, spontaneous/effortless resonance. All these references to vibration or resonance are ways of describing the nature of the self as pure relation. The self is basically a focal point of resonant force or intensity that enables it to create new connections, intersections, relations between all things in the world. As a point of resonance, it signifies a fundamental opening of the self to the outside, its others, to the world, such that the duality of self (here, near) and world (there/far) is merged into the all-pervasive and ever-constant resonance that is *nam*. Alternatively stated, *nam* signifies fundamental interconnectedness as the true nature of reality, the implication being that it is possible to disjunctively associate entities, selves, people, societies, cultures through the differences. From this perspective difference is not a mode of separation, but paradoxically, a mode of connection that derives its force or intensity from the impulse within creation itself.

From Metaphysics to Social Ontology

What are some of the immediate ontological and social implications of acknowledging *nam* as fundamental reality? Considering ontology first, in contradistinction from modernist social theories such as those of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, which emphasize the total objectification of the world vis-à-vis disinterested, distanced standpoints that allow the self to manipulate and control the world by representing the world in an image\picture (Heidegger 1977: 115–154), Sikh philosophy stresses that self and world will always already be fundamentally connected through *nam*-resonance. Such capacity for resonant relation between self and world is “constitutive not only of human psyche but of sociality” (Rosa 2020: 30–33). To acknowledge *nam* is to accept that humanity cannot control its world but must instead resonate with the world, which means remaining fundamentally open to being affected by the world, by other selves, and therefore by our *socius*.

Secondly, because *nam* as resonance cannot be controlled, so our relation to the world and to the *socius* ought to be a non-controlling and mutually affective relation. What this means is that such resonance cannot be artificially engineered and therefore manipulated by scientific knowledge, technology, or political management. Because *nam* is unpulsed, uncaused, unconstructed, we have no choice but to say that it simply happens as an event. Thus, the most appropriate human stance towards it is simply to let it happen, to let it come as an event. Such a stance on the part of the self or agent is of course at odds with the very thesis of modernity, which predicts social breakdown, anarchy, a relapse back into the dark ages of superstition, religion, etc. However, this is not the way that Sikh philosophy sees the social implications of concepts like *anhad-śabad* and *nam*.

In the following sections, I take a closer look at some of the social and political implications of *nam*-based ontology with a view to illustrating how the Sikh philosophical worldview might converge or differ from the dominant paradigm of liberal democracy. My discussion will focus on three

broad areas of interest: (1) pluralism, (2) activism, (3) statehood and sovereignty. Although the discussions of each of these topics naturally converge and overlap to some degree, the section on pluralism shows how the earlier discussion of the self as internally complex, in turn complicates ideas of community and coexistence in a way that challenges nationalism and beckons towards a very different understanding of civil society, multicultural citizenship, and a cosmopolitan order. The section on activism challenges the Western idea that activism and political consciousness is premised on oppositional consciousness. In contradistinction Sikh philosophy teaches a level of activist engagement in pursuit of social justice that rivals or surpasses any variety of Western socialisms yet is premised on a non-oppositional consciousness and impelled by affects such as no-fear (*nirbhau*), no-enmity (*nirvair*), no-negativity towards the other. I argue that this non-oppositional consciousness fosters and is fostered by a theory of *nonviolent violence* and resistance that is radically different to the juridical based violence of liberalism. Although space does not permit going any further than this, these ideas can help us theorize movements of social justice, human rights, race, ecology, immigration, health, poverty, to name but a few. The third section builds on the foregoing discussion of nonviolence to take a brief look at what this means for statehood, sovereignty, and political authority.

Pluralism

The Sikh philosophical approach to pluralism can be usefully summarized in the terse formula *ek-aneek* (One-Many), which states that there is no such thing as a one (*ek*) that is not always already multiple or plural (*aneek*). The formula *ek-aneek* is in fact derived from the opening words of the Guru Granth Sahib, which can be interpreted as the grounding statement about the nature of reality: (*ik oankar satnam . . .*)

Oneness Always Expresses Itself in the Multiplicity of Beings in One in the Same Way

Stated differently, the intrinsic plurality (*aneek*) of the one (*ek*), or the underlying oneness of plurality, constitutes the true nature of reality (*sat*), whose essential resonance is configured in the word *nam*. It is commonly accepted amongst Sikh philosophers that the principle of *ek-aneek*, one-many, applies equally to the external world (cosmos) as it does to the inner world of the psyche. Cosmos and psyche, cosmology and psychology are two sides of the same coin.

Applying the *ek-aneek* principle to the self, from the standpoint of undifferentiated resonance called *nam*, the true nature of the self is something like a “being-singular-plural,” an I+not-I. The idea that the self fundamentally coexists with its other, and that this coexistence is the most elementary form of relation between all things, is expressed in the terms *sangi* (bond or association) or *sangat*, which simply means “being-with” or “to be with.” In effect *sang-* or *sangat* is the primal form of community because it originates in the heart of the self. If the self is not already in communion with itself and its other, there can be no true community as such. In its most elementary sense *sangat*, or authentic community, is not the kinship of those who have something in common but rather the kinship of those who may have nothing in common, and this being-with (*sangat*) also extends to the non-human realm.

To take this a step further, if this bond between human and human, human and nonhuman, is grounded in non-oppositional consciousness or non-binary thought, or the metaphysic of resonant relation (*nam*), then this metaphysic should allow us to differentiate between genuine or qualitative pluralism as opposed to merely quantitative or empirical pluralism. While the latter “signifies a mere

juxtaposition of existing countable units,” the former points to genuinely deep and mutual engagement and relatedness (Dallmayr 2003: 9).

Tangible evidence of the former (deep pluralism) can be found in the lived practices – linguistic, spiritual, philosophical, ritual – of Indians prior to the congealing and sedimentation of indigenous traditions into the modern nationalized forms we know as *Sikhism*, *Hinduism*, and *Buddhism*. It is well documented for example, that between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries CE, despite the existence of a formal hierarchy of languages and pieties, Indians had developed an inherently multilingual spoken idiom (Hindustani) that became the *lingua franca* of South Asia. Despite centuries of non-interaction and ideological, religious, and civilizational standoff between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures in South Asia, by the thirteenth century an intrinsically hybridized idiom of Hindustani was created and developed over centuries of sociolinguistic encounters by *disjunctively associating* words from Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Prakrit vernaculars. This was no simple fusion or syncretism of preexisting identities but a true bonding of cultures through their difference. The only thing that could enable differences to coexist in total harmony were the forms of spirituality that became prevalent at the time and were shared across cultures. In this spiritual atmosphere, cultural differences were fused without destroying identities, the result being the creation of heterogeneous forms that deeply affected popular piety and notions of selfhood. Because of this intrinsic heterogeneity of speech and thought, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus often shared ritual practices and spiritualities that crossed borders because it was a form of difference that *resided at the heart of the self*. Within this hetero-lingual, hetero-religious environment, people developed ways of speaking in which they were able to maintain their inherited languages, customs, pieties, yet at the same time were able to communicate and share with speakers or practitioners of other traditions.

Arguably one of the best examples of this deep and qualitative pluralism can be found in the Sikh literature whose poetic idiom (*gurbani*) emerged through the lived heterogeneity of its founders, the Sikh Gurus. Although it has its own formal script, *gurbani* can be seen as a non-oppositional disjunctive syncretism of different expressions of the divine, Muslim, Hindu, Sufi, Buddhist, Jain, and *bhakti*, or different words for the nature of reality, such as *hukam* from Arabic-Persian, or *nirgun-sargun* from Indian philosophy, *sunya* or *sunnam* from the Buddhist-Jain inheritance. At the same time, though, *gurbani* retained a singularity that gave Sikhi or *gurmata* its own internally diverse, yet coherent, identity.

In the Sikh world such expressions of qualitative pluralism did not remain at the level of mere theory or teaching. They were constantly translated into lived practices honed through concrete social engagements between Sikh and non-Sikh groups. The Sikh Gurus attracted followers from Muslim and Hindu communities but never attempted to convert or dissuade them from their own practices. The ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, was tortured and sacrificed his own life to protect the Hindu Brahmin community, whose beliefs and principles he did not share. The fifth Guru, Arjun, invited a Muslim saint to lay the foundation stone of the central Sikh shrine (Harimandir) and encouraged people of no faith or all faiths to share in Sikh spirituality and inter-communal dining within Sikh temples. This practice of inter-communal dining and providing hospitality and service to those of different faiths, or no faith, continues to be central to Sikh gurdwaras or places of worship at least in principle if not always in practice.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, as European-style nationalism was internalized by colonial elites (Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh), each of these communities developed mutually exclusive forms of nationalist identity with religious, social, and political boundaries. The Sikh community was not immune to these processes of nationalism and began to redefine itself as a nation (*qaum*) and as a religion in ways that would constrict its pluralist and deeply multicultural

ethos. Nevertheless, even when nationalist sentiments reached a peak during the lead-up to the partition of India, the Sikh sense of nationalism remained strongly communitarian, and pragmatic, insofar as it continued to place a sense of intersectionality at the heart of its assertions of national identity. Indeed, as a model of community, nationalism has never found much support either within the ethos of Sikh spirituality and practice, or in Sikh philosophical thought. Even though a certain strand of Sikh Punjabi ethno-nationalism did strike a chord in certain fringe Sikh diasporic organizations, it continues to be poorly articulated, reactionary, and tied to a clan-based tribalism (see Singh and Shani 2022: 132–210).

The reasons for the incompatibility between Sikh ethno-nationalism and Sikh philosophy are not far to seek. In order to fulfill the basic criteria for unifying a people, Sikh elites had to redefine the core of Sikh sovereignty as a political monotheism. This required strategic shifts in the interpretation of core principles such as the nature of unity and oneness, the nature of consciousness, and ultimately the nature of community, all of which was motivated in reaction to the development of Hindu nationalism, which threatened to absorb *gurmat* and Sikhism into the ever-expanding Hindu nationalist fold.

In short Sikh philosophy had to be translated into a political theology, which alone could provide the kind of boundary-forming identity politics with any semblance of intellectual integrity. Equally important is that for nationalism to become embedded into the Sikh mindset, European Orientalists helped to translate and confine knowledge about Sikhism into the framework and idiom of European-style secularism, which not only legally classified *Sikhi* and *gurmat* as a religion (hence *Sikhism*) with its distinct “beliefs and practices,” akin to Protestant Christianity, but also relocated Sikhs and Sikhism into a racialized world-historical order of civilization. Colonial Sikh elites internalized the modalities of this modern racialized world order by creating parity between the principles of Sikh philosophy and Christian-secular-liberal modernity, namely, the idea of historical-political consciousness and a legalized theory of violence. In other words, colonial Sikh elites imported nationalist political consciousness into the heart of the Sikh self-narrative, inadvertently creating a bifurcation between peaceful non-worldly, quietest Sikh philosophy of Guru Nanak and the apparently politicized (because violent) philosophy of the later Gurus, especially Guru Gobind Singh, who created a formal order known as the Khalsa, which, from then onwards, represented the political body of the Sikhs, the proto-ethno-nationalist form of Sikh polity, and embodiment of its sovereignty. In the minds of Orientalist scholars (colonial and postcolonial alike), the turn to violence was clear evidence of a transformation from quietest/spiritual to activist/political nature of Sikhism. The clearest statement of this Orientalism can be found in the work of W.H. McLeod, who argued that “as the form and dominant philosophy of the Panth changed, so too did its religious perceptions and the literature which gave them expression” (McLeod 1984: 11).

However, this was nothing more than a fantasy of the Orientalist imagination, albeit one that was unfortunately internalized by colonial Sikh elites. What McLeod called the “dominant philosophy” of Sikhism never actually changed. It was simply reframed within the seemingly opposed idioms of political theology and secularism for the purpose of achieving recognition and the possibility of self-governance from the British crown. This legally and colonially “framed Sikhism” is now in the process of being decolonized and disinherited by younger generations of Sikh thinkers, activists, and academics.

If nationalism and liberalism are both equally grounded in an onto-epistemology that fosters methodologically quantitative approaches to self, society, citizenship, and political organization, and if neither can be strictly delinked from imputed ethno-religious origins, national identity and oppositional identity politics, it begs the question: is there a model of community/society/citizenship that’s worthy of Sikh philosophy and the kind of pluralism it espouses? To put it slightly differently,

what image of civic society might be adequate to the inherently complex and internally multiple notions of subjectivity and self-espoused by Sikh philosophy, one that also speaks to the “specific conditions of our times” – the condition of inexorable globality that continues to be disturbed by the gravitational pull of ethno-nationalism?

At the risk of being labeled either an idealist or an armchair activist, I’d like to suggest a critical term that corresponds practically and conceptually to the values espoused by Sikh philosophy. The term is *diasporicity*, or *diaspora*. Most scholars in the humanities and social sciences are of course familiar with the terms *diaspora* and *diasporicity* but have tended to consider them primarily in their role as “empirically oriented . . . sociological descriptors” (Barber 2011: ix–xi) of global movements of people from one place to another. I follow a more marginal trend that imbues *diaspora* with conceptual character. Thus, philosophically, it is possible to think of being or existence itself as *diasporic*. In other words, *diaspora* as concept provides an indication of an ontological condition of *being diasporic* (hence *diasporicity*), which in turn engenders a certain kind of epistemic and social orientation.

From this altered perspective, *diaspora* refers to a “pattern of thinking,” knowing, and lived experience that engages conditions of the present *not* oppositionally (as do the modern Western trio of liberalism, Marxism, nationalism), but *non-oppositionally*, that is to say, in the spiritual practice of oneness. Furthermore, the nature of thinking and living that corresponds to *diaspora* is a *thinking-living-between*. It is identifiable only as a *relation* – the between-ness of different entities, different cultures, different concepts, societies, religious peoples, etc. It is a mode of thought-life that works by disjunctively affirming differences without trying to somehow reconcile them into an overarching or underlying identity. If identity does indeed result from such disjunctive affirmations of the oppositionalities, it can only be described as a differential identity or a self-differentiating identity. What’s therefore different about *diaspora* is the value that emerges from keeping differential relations intact rather than reducing one to the other. This is not an example of “toleration” in the liberal multicultural sense but a way in which Sikh philosophy affirms and practices a difference that is already in the heart of the self. A world philosophy that teaches something similar might be found in Ubuntu, which states: “I am because you are. . . . You are because we all are.” *Diaspora* and *diasporicity* is therefore not a condition of “people” or of “society” as such. It is more akin a plane of consciousness in which encounters between modes of difference is the same as a settled mode of belonging. Indeed, according to *diasporic* consciousness, the meaning of belonging itself changes. To belong is first and foremost to belong to a plural self. The self’s internal plurality is the condition for any genuine external plurality.

There may be a tendency for some people to associate this notion of *diaspora* with real life social conditions of liminality, minoritarianism, postcoloniality. That is certainly true. But this again would also reduce *diaspora* to an empirical “sociological descriptor.” I would argue with Barber, Bakare-Yussuf, and Braidotti that *diaspora* is not limited only to the dispossessed, to postcolonials, to the disempowered. Rather it needs to be seen as the ontological condition of majoritarian communities, even though this condition is generally disavowed within liberal (and non-liberal) societies precisely in order to maintain hegemony of power and privilege by keeping the dominant majority’s authoritative center intact and in place. In contrast Sikh philosophy has practically demonstrated how to challenge the hegemony of majoritarian systems.

Perhaps the earliest demonstration can be seen right at the heart of Nanak’s culminating spiritual experience, which is not an experience between “Man” and an eminent divine, as is commonly portrayed, but emerged from the experience of living a life between starkly different languages, communities, cultures, religions, philosophies, civilizations (Hindu and Muslim). Guru Nanak expressed the nature of this experience with the words “No Hindu, no Muslim,” which is not a

rejection of either of these constituencies but an affirmation of the true vocation of each of these dominant paths, a reminder that they had forgotten how to coexist. Nanak's words "no Hindu, no Muslim" were a reminder to each of these dominant societies that they should first *experience cultural difference internally at the level of the self*, on the basis of which alone they could hope to coexist and live peacefully with each other and generate forms of common and mutually beneficial governance. "No Hindu, no Muslim," a statement that emerges from the depths of mysticism, challenged each of these dominant and mutually antagonistic communities to recognize that their value systems were in principle contestable and open to change, that these communities were diasporic in nature.

Activism and Social Justice

Although Sikhism's involvement in social justice movements is well documented, the motivational drive behind its activist tendencies is less well understood. Scholars have by and large attributed such tendencies either to an "ethical monotheism" or, just as misleadingly, to the idea that the Sikh movement deviated from its originally nonviolent pacifist message towards an involvement in political violence and affairs of state. While the former attribution can be dismissed as a colonial era cliché, the latter is more problematic because it is premised on an erroneous understanding of Sikh philosophy and theology. The premise is that Sikh philosophy derives from the spiritual experience of Guru Nanak, whose nature is essentially quietest, ascetic, and therefore nonviolent, which implies non-involvement in worldly states of affairs. To become involved in worldly states of affairs and therefore affairs of the state, as did the later Gurus, who (so the argument goes) effectively renounced the pacifist message of the earlier Sikh gurus, which implies a fundamental deviation from its originally nonviolent philosophy, meaning that *Sikhi* had become politically conscious and inclined towards a quest for statehood and territorial sovereignty. From this perspective, Sikhism's activism and drive for social change and justice is always tainted by an unspoken accusation of illegitimacy and therefore illegality vis-à-vis the knowledge system. The remainder of this section investigates the relationship between Sikh philosophy and activism via two moves. First, I argue that Sikh philosophy's key concepts, such as the notion of oneness, is intrinsically connected to a theory of (non)violence that is disavowed by the religio-secular framework of the modern liberal state, which exercises a monopoly over the meaning and functionality of violence. This brings me to the second move, which is to shift the very question about nonviolence towards the more fruitful question of *resistance*. I do this by asking how Sikh philosophy as a knowledge system can pose *resistance* to the injustices, to the vulgarities, and especially to the epistemic violence of a contemporary era, while remaining true to a value system that affirms difference and non-oppositionality? Or to put it more bluntly, in what sense can *gurmata* be considered a philosophy of activism?

As a way of answering this, it is worth repeating what I said earlier about the nature of *gurmata* and from where it derives its essential impulse. *Gurmata* is not a set of propositions or a preexisting rationale but a frame of mind, a psychic formation that does not separate ego from non-ego, I from not-I. Instead, it keeps these opposing tendencies together in a productive unity (*ek*) that is simultaneously multiple (*anek*). But to be able to do this, to remain absolutely one and many at the same time, is impossible *without violating the very nature of ego itself*, which is to exert self-control and self-identity as a means to controlling the world around it. In other words, ego has to perform an internal violence, a violence to its own sense of sovereignty, which the Sikh Gurus speak of variously as "dying-to-Word," "dying-to-self," or simply "killing ego" (*haumai marana*). This internal violence to the self is qualitatively different from conventional notions of violence as acts publicly performed by agents on other agents or institutions. Dying-to-the-self (*haumai marana*) is an equally real but qualitatively different sense of violence that emerges from seismic transformations within

the ego, the self's struggle with itself. This kind of internal change can neither be measured nor expressed in the same way that we measure things in the world or express events. The only "measure" and register of internal transformation (killing ego) is to be found in *affect*, which alone is capable of registering psychological, social, and political change as it is expressed in external events.

Two things need to be underscored about the nature of this internal violence, which elsewhere I have referred to as "sovereign violence" (Mandair 2022a). Such violence is sovereign because it depends on no one, or nothing other than itself. It arises from within an internally transformed subjectivity called *gurmukh* (lit. a perfected self). Unlike external physical violence, the sovereign violence of the *gurmukh* is fundamentally nonviolent because it emanates internally from the activity of self-differentiation – the struggle of the self to differ from itself yet remain one. By harnessing its own internal difference, the *gurmukh* can assemble force/power in alternative ways to those demarcated by dominant societies or symbolic orders.

If society or state-forms are responsible for ordering social, individual, and political relations in ways that can be hegemonic, controlling, oppressive, then what's different about the *gurmukh* state is that its mode of individuation cannot be accessed by dominant symbolic orders or by state forms in the same way that, for argument's sake, the modern state can exercise control over the atomic individualized subject. In contrast to the subject of liberal individualism, whose potential for making social relations is controlled by state processes, the *gurmukh* exercises sovereign individuality giving her the ability to assemble force/power in alternative ways to those sanctioned by the state-form, ultimately giving rise to new forms of social relation. In Sikh philosophy, the self-realized state that is *gurmukh* is both the inspiration and the beating heart of any activism. An abiding misconception about the nature of the *gurmukh* is that it is an asocial, ascetic entity. This is not the case. The psycho-spiritual transformation resulting in *gurmukh* subjectivity does not happen on some transcendental plane. It takes place within the specific social, intellectual, political realms of normal lived experience such that the transformed individual (*gurmukh*) remains "embodied and embedded" in the complex matrix of symbolic relations that constitute the self. In fact, the *gurmukh*'s individuality enables it to cultivate an unlimited optimism in complexities and macro – and micro – instances of lived experience with an attitude of renewed confidence in its potential for extracting new possibilities from the present and the future.

In Sikh philosophy, this unlimited optimism and confidence is known as *chaṛdhī kalā*. The term *kalā* refers to a creative art of self-care that is able to harness and extract the potential tied up in bodies and concepts for creating new connections, new interactions in order to mutually increase one's power of existing, thereby directing one's life towards an optimistic future. In practical terms, this power of mutually coexisting translates into the ability to make wider and deeper connections with one's own community, but even more importantly, it allows the *gurmukh* to foster relations with those with whom one has nothing in common. In accordance with this philosophy, one can only make such creative connections across borders and boundaries of all types, if one's frame of mind is without fear (*nirbhau*) and without enmity (*nirvair*). These states of mind are necessary for genuine activism, by which I mean any activism that is not merely *reactive*, that is, able to respond to external events only within demarcated frameworks of thought and action. In this regard, activism should not be associated with conventional politics, which is little more than social management by majoritarian societies or groups, but with what might be described as a spiritually motivated involvement in political movements for social justice. This is activism in the true sense as it arises from Sikh philosophy. While the former merely manages society within the power dynamics delineated by specific state forms (despotic, liberal, theocratic, or otherwise), the latter is focused more on experimenting with new forms of social coexistence and relation-building. In the context of Sikh thought and practice, this transformative experimentation is activism driven by *chaṛdhī kalā*.

My point in distinguishing between conventional politics and activism motivated by Sikh philosophical principles is to stress that these modes of social involvement are predicated and sustained on two very different axes of time noted earlier. On the one hand there is *kāl*, which is ordinary chronological sequential time manufactured by ego; and on the other hand, there is *akāl*, the limitless time generated and accessed through processes of ego-loss. These two different modes of time-consciousness in turn correspond to contrasting psychic formations: *manmukh* (reactive activism) versus *gurmukh* (proactive activism). Conventional or *kāl*-centric politics is driven by negativity emanating from oppositional binaries and sustains reactive “enterprises” of majoritarian societies, which can bring about social change but without changing the matrix of power itself. In contradistinction, *akāl*-centrism is predicated on an ontologically richer time-consciousness *akāl*, or time as it is constantly experienced as a becoming, as an affirmation of difference in the present, and an openness towards futures yet to come. Its affective characteristic is *chaṛdhī kalā* – action inspired from an eternally ascendant optimism. Perhaps most importantly *akāl*-centric time-consciousness enables actants to extract new and creative possibilities out of currently stratified states of affairs. To put it somewhat crassly, *akāl*-centric time-consciousness can melt frozen or sedimented forms of social existence and release new forces of connection and residents with a changing world.

Sovereignty and State

As already noted above, the fundamental concepts of Sikh philosophy are not reducible to theorization. Aside from merely representing objects, events, and propositional facts pertaining to actual Sikh tradition, they are socially engaged with the world. In the first two centuries of its development, Sikh philosophy developed a set of praxical concepts that not only fostered engagement in a relational knowing-doing with tangible and intangible implications for different public spheres but helped minoritarian Sikh communities to negotiate the trials and tribulations of living in hegemonic (and at times oppressive) state-forms. Two of the main praxical concepts include *miri-piri* (the unity of the spiritual and the political), and the Khalsa (the spiritual political order created in 1699). Both of these concepts revolve around the nature and question of sovereignty in Sikhism, which finds practical application in the form of actual institutions known as (1) *gurmata* (a democratic resolution passed by the collective body-politic of the community [known as *Sarbat Khalsa*] in the presence of the primary Sikh scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*), (2) Akal Takht (lit. “throne of the eternal”) – the principal center of Sikh temporal authority situated adjacent to the Harimandir, the central shrine in Sikhism. Due to restrictions of space, I shall focus only on the concepts of *miri-piri* and Khalsa.

The concept of *miri-piri* endeavors to express the essential nature of sovereign authority by combining the temporal-political (*miri*) and spiritual (*piri*) domains (Singh 2021: ix–lxxvii). The combination of spiritual and political authority was attributed initially to the living Guru and came into actual usage at the time of the sixth Guru, Hargobind, who practically demonstrated its practical implications by donning two swords, one representing *miri*, the other representing *piri*. After the line of ten living Gurus was ended in 1708, the function of *miri-piri* was adopted by the Khalsa. In short, *miri-piri* signifies the fundamental oneness of the normally bifurcated and oppositional domains of spirituality and the political. In this sense the *miri-piri* concept is radically different from systems such as (Western) political theology that have tried to subsume one of these domains under the other. The two main forms of political theology are Christendom (which subsumes worldly functions of state under the authority of God and Church) and modern liberal secularism (where the state subsumes religion by privatizing it). Central to the work of modern political theory is the principle that genuine sovereignty can only be based on the rule of “the one.” In both secular and religious systems of Euro-American thought the principle of sovereignty demands that “the one”

be defined as an immutable ontological ground (e.g., an eternal God or an eternal self), which translates almost seamlessly into the false metaphysical assumption of a fundamental opposition between sovereignty of “the one” (which brings peace and order) and the rule of “the many,” which can only bring anarchy and chaos. To establish this operative dualism between the one versus the many, however, requires the Western metaphysical system to create a split in the nature of reality itself, by bifurcating time-consciousness into an essential distinction between divine time (realm of eternity/immutability/permanence) and human time (realm of change, becoming, impermanence). In contradistinction *miri-piri* is based on the self-realization of unitary consciousness, which assumes the fundamental and intrinsic coexistence and co-imbrication of human time (*kal*) and non-human time (*akal*). As argued earlier, *kal* and *akal* are entirely different orders of time-consciousness, but they are nevertheless non-oppositional. And their non-oppositionality arises not from any external principle like “God” or universal reason but from the annihilation of ego, which alone allows differences to be associated and synthesized without dissolving them into identities. The implication for social and political theory is a regrounding of sovereignty within the *relationship* between master and slave, ruler and ruled.

Having said this about *miri-piri*, however, it would still remain a relatively abstract and somewhat mystical concept, for example, in the symbolism of donning the two swords. Its practical application to human governance was first demonstrated by Nanak’s tenth successor, Guru Gobind Singh, through the creation of a new spiritual-political order known as the Khalsa in 1699. The Khalsa literally means sovereign peoples capable of self-rule. On March 30, 1699, Guru Gobind Singh staged a real-life three-scene drama to publicly demonstrate the *miri-piri* concept (N.G.K. Singh 2005). The first two scenes of his drama were devoted to creating a new system of initiation, which psychologically broke the neophytes out of the matrix of existing social, political, and religious order from which they believed there could be no release, at least not in this life. The first two scenes can therefore be regarded as spiritual-psychological and in many ways were not that different from existing forms of religious initiation. The third scene, however, was radically different in as much as the Guru seemed to turn the entire drama on its head. In this scene the spiritual master who had just brought a new social order into being suddenly went down on his knees and begged to be initiated by the very disciples he had initiated just minutes before. The political meaning of this scene is often missed by scholars and laypersons alike. By begging for initiation, going down on his knees, the Guru demonstrated how to transfer power to the people by relinquishing kingship and/or personal sovereignty.

This third scene was in essence an exercise in self-decapitation by the divine king, a *practical demonstration* that “sovereignty” as a concept has value only if it takes its measure from the act of ego-loss. In other words, the sovereign is the one who understands in thought, desire, and deed that sovereignty essentially eludes the sovereign (Nancy 2007: 103). The very condition that authorizes a sovereign with the power to rule (*hukam*), at the same time demands that the same sovereign in order to rule undergo a self-overcoming (submission to *hukam*) as a public expression of personal powerlessness that transfers all power to “the multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2004). Beyond the symbolism, the immediate message it signaled was that if this new social order wanted to maintain hegemony, to exercise sovereign power and freedom, it would first and foremost need to learn that the true nature of sovereignty as the “power to authorize” (Stack 2015: 4) has to be grounded not on the simple accumulation and holding of power but in exercising ego-loss *on behalf of others*, what has sometimes been referred to as “political love” (Hardt and Negri 2004). The god-king’s exercise of self-loss was an invitation to the community to remain open to difference by keeping its sense of self open to multiplicity, to the sharing of power, sharing of resources. True sovereignty resides in a dominant society’s sense of diasporicity, its ability to accept change, difference, new ways of thinking.

It is worth noting that this exercise in pluralism of self/community was demonstrated in 1699, a century before the French Revolution inaugurated a different kind of republican rule based on the principles of liberal individualism (Shani 2014: 271). Unlike French republicanism, or English parliamentarianism, both of which retain a political theological dualism concentrating authority in a state apparatus that continues to emulate the essential characteristics of the deposed eternal divine (the Crown in the case of the English, and President in the case of the French), the Sikh system finds a way to empower the “multitude” in a way that sustains suspicion of and resistance to political classes and dynasties, as well as state apparati. The concepts of *miri-piri* and the Khalsa offer several innovative ways to think about politics outside of conventional state-form. First, politics needs to be separated from mundane management of civil societies and state institutions. Second, grounding the political engagement in a mode of consciousness that keeps the opposing registers of *kal* and *akal* together allows communities to connect with others with whom they may have nothing in common. If the paradoxical rationality of the Khalsa’s political ethos is followed through to its conclusions, the result is a stateless statehood that may never be realized in actuality but whose ideal form nevertheless inspires daring experimentation in cross-societal engagement, creating communities capable to sharing spiritualities, languages, ways of living, all in the absence of a formally binding state structure. The feminist scholar of religion Naomi Goldenberg invokes the term *vestigial state(s)* to refer to this seemingly impossible sense of statehood that fosters belonging and non-belonging at the same time (Goldenberg 2015: 280–292). Although Goldenberg is primarily thinking of entities that refuse and resist containment within the privatized sphere created by the modern nation-state and thereby resist the autonomic logic of conventional state sovereignty that interdicts every challenge to the rule of “the one,” it is possible to adapt the term vestigial states in relation to *miri-piri* and the Khalsa, which work according to an alternative form of sovereignty whose logic is heteronomic, or as I have referred to previously, as diasporic.

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SIKH SOVEREIGNTY AND MODERN GOVERNMENT

Conner Singh VanderBeek

Introduction

Representation, governance, and sovereignty have been central concerns of Sikhs all throughout the modern era. From the late colonial to the postcolonial periods, Sikhs have had to navigate minority status within the state powers in which they are nested: in British and independent India and throughout Europe and North America. Within these various contexts, Sikhs have striven for recognition and for the respect of their dominant markers of identity. These concerns are respected as long as Sikhs pledge their loyalty to each state (Gurharpal Singh 2005: 158; Sian 2013: 44). This is especially the case in the modern nation-state, which is predicated on a model of submission: surrender of one's personal freedoms and differences from the center in exchange for some degree of protection from death (Bataille 2001: 185).

Western modes of governance – of secularity, of statecraft, of law and its regimes of enforcement and discipline – require those beneath its purview to submit to its self-proclaimed universality. Any group that does not do so is labeled an outlier that the state then tries to absorb, often with violence (Singh and Shani 2015: 280; Mandair 2015: 183). Arvind Mandair argues that because the West constructs its opposite as the catch-all “non-West,” no singular philosophy within that negative category can ever stand equally with the empirical, rational West. Consequently, groups deemed non-Western by this Eurocentric machinery have to adopt the language of the West before they can step on its playing field.

Beginning with a discussion of the origins of sovereignty in the construction of the modern nation-state, this chapter shows the relationship of Sikh pursuits of agency in modern governments – particularly in India, the UK, Canada, and the US. I demonstrate how Sikh movements for recognition within states are always already circumscribed by the power structures and vocabularies of modern government. This chapter offers numerous cases that show how Sikhs gain agency when they work within existing dominant power structures (especially in the West) and are punished when they try to defy them (especially in India). As Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair writes,

In the current context there is no such thing as a Sikh experience outside the framework of global Western modernity with its attendant capture and division of life by regimes such as capitalism, democracy, neo-liberalism, or Statist ideologies such as public-private, religion-secular.

(2015: 175)

Sikh sovereignty, due to the pervasive reach of Western sovereignty, can only work in translation.

When Sikhs are able to work beyond violence, they work through visibility politics. This includes, within the nation, gaining recognition by playing into existing forms (i.e., serving in government, etc.) or altering existing forms to accommodate Sikhs (i.e., religious exemptions for turbans and kirpans). Transnationally, Sikhs lobby for global or local Sikh causes, whether those movements come from a position of power (i.e., from Sikh politicians in the diaspora) or from one of resistance (i.e., Khalistani movements). These actions, regardless of the scope, show the inescapability of the Western frame of sovereignty in Sikh pursuits of agency, autonomy, and self-determination. Moreover, they demonstrate how Sikh sovereignty in the contemporary global system, whether transnational in conception or territorially based in Punjab, is branded religious and therefore anti-modern, terroristic, and therefore requiring violent oppression (Mandair 2015: 183). This cruel reality renders impossible any Sikh sovereignty that is alternative to the modern nation-state model. Modern governance prefers Sikhs accommodated and absorbed yet apolitical.

Sovereignty, Violence, and Submission

Sovereignty, from the Latin *superanus*, is used to refer to the supremacy that animates the state's right to power in a territory, which justifies the subservience of peoples under the state (Forbes 1998: 14). This power mostly pertains to territorial governance but also encompasses language, culture, belief, and values (Rai 2011: 30). Modern sovereignty emerged through a long series of wars in thirteenth-through sixteenth-century Europe by which the power that God imbued in the ruler was transferred to the multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2001: 73). The systems of nation-states and rule by the masses took hold after the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, but so too did ideas of supremacy, domination, and conquest (Shani 2005: 60). During this time, Europe theorized the universal, rational subject as a contrast to the countless cultures they encountered, deemed were impossible to civilize, and therefore subjugated (Lowe 2015: 5). It was ironically on the backs of the oppressed that Europe learned how to cultivate its own sense of civilization (1).

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair summarizes the processes of colonialism in four steps: (1) the colonizer encounters another culture and fails to recognize themselves in the Other; (2) the colonizer starts to recognize humanity in the Other after a certain period of colonization; (3) the colonizer depoliticizes Indigenous culture as mere identity and implants their outside knowledge structures; (4) using a hybrid of Indigenous concepts and colonial knowledge, the colonized population eventually achieves liberation (Mandair 2016: 184–185). This process continues in the postcolonial era of nation-states, wherein nations that have been liberated from colonialism have had to adopt the power structures of the West to be recognized as participants in the world order (Shani 2005: 65). At the same time, formerly colonized peoples have migrated to the West, where they face a similar othering and depoliticization as they did under colonial rule. If any group is to attain sovereignty on any scale, they must still work through dominant power structures.

The UN builds their definition of sovereignty atop self-determination, which includes the right of a people to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UNHR 1976). Self-determination, however, is not equivalent to sovereignty. Pursuits for self-determination by subnational groups can also lead to the creation of autonomous regions and special economic zones (i.e., the goal of the Anandpur Sahib Resolutions, discussed later), the federation of states under a presiding body (i.e., the European Union), or the assimilation/absorption of groups within nation-states (i.e., American Sikhs claiming American values) (Guibernau 2004: 1257; Deol 2019: 189). Each path still maintains the subservience of said subnational groups to a higher, centralized power that presides over a consolidated land mass.

While self-determination is the right of a nation of people to control their own destinies, territory is the crux of sovereignty (UNPO 1993: 14). A nation, according to the UN's Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, is defined as

a group of human beings which possesses the will to be identified as a nation or people and to determine its common destiny as a nation or people and is bound by a common heritage which can be historical, racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious or territorial.

(10)

According to the UNPO, nations have the right to self-govern their territory and to have that territory be respected by their neighbors – the right to sovereignty. Subnational groups, under these rules, may also secede by appealing to the community of nations for recognition and showing how they are being suppressed by their parent nations (UNPO 1993: 6).

Paradoxically, the territorial basis of modern sovereignty is what both justifies and undercuts nation-states from forming, demonstrated by numerous cases in India. While the 1993 Special Session of the UNPO “cautioned that the principle of territorial integrity of states should not act as an impediment to the implementation of genuine self-determination claims” (5), India puts great weight on the sanctity of its Hindu-majority lands. For example, India criminalizes maps that display international borders other than the official ones – like those circulated by Khalistani groups (Axel 2001: 105). The state also bans separatist groups like US-based Sikhs for Justice, which a Delhi High Court tribunal deemed “threatened the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of India” (Press Trust of India 2020). Internally, any move by a minority group that undermines the unified image of Indian, secular-Hindu sovereignty and the mythologies underpinning it – from the self-determination movements of Nagaland, Kashmir, Assam, and Punjab to the contested land of the former Babri Masjid – is met with “hegemonic and violent control” (Gurharpal Singh 2019: 315; Rai 2011: 14).

Giorgio Agamben argues that sovereign powers wield lethal force for the preservation of the state (Lowe 2015: 240). The Indian state, for example, dispatches mobs to commit anti-Muslim violence on its behalf, be it the Shiv Sena mobs in Maharashtra in the 1990s or the RSS and VHP troupes that perpetrated the Gujarat pogroms of 2002–2003 (Blom Hansen 2001: 9–10; 2005: 182). Sikhs faced a similar impunity when 100,000 army troops attacked the Golden Temple complex and 41 other gurdwaras during Operation Bluestar in June 1984, and when, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi that October, mobs and police together killed 3,000 Sikhs in a retaliatory purge of resettlements in Delhi (Bhagal 2011: 78; Das 2006: 91). Lethal force serves as a reminder that each minority's settlement in a state is made possible by the grace and mercy of the sovereign. Minorities must thus somewhat suppress their sovereign rights to linguistic, spiritual, and cultural difference in order to earn tolerance.

Violence and the potential for it thus incentivize minority groups to conform to the societal norms of the state. For example, Sikhs in the UK, Canada, and US have undertaken various political, media, and activist campaigns in the last several decades to prove their worth to the national fabric – to essentialize Sikh identity to a series of simple, digestible traits. In reducing Sikh subjectivity to a quintessential list of differences from the center (turban, Punjabi language/ethnicity, status as non-Hindu or non-Muslim), Sikhs inadvertently depoliticize themselves, having traded their distinctiveness as a group for security within the state (Nijhawan 2016: 138; Mandair 2018: 444).

India

The relationship of Sikhs to the Indian government illustrates the pitfalls of the Sikh pursuit of autonomy. Not since the British annexed the Sikh Kingdom in 1849 have Sikhs been able to

recreate a self-governed state (Axel 2001: 2). Instead, they have had to lobby for demands through the crown and through an Indian Republic that continually tries to erase their agency as a distinct ethno-religious group.

In the period prior to independence, the main factions of the Shiromani Akali Dal allied with the Congress Party based on a guarantee from the latter that Sikh autonomy would be respected upon independence (Bhupinder Singh 2006: 841). This promise was left unfulfilled, as the post-1947 Congress government instead drafted a constitution that grouped Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists under Hindu law. Even during the linguistic reorganization of India's states, Prime Minister Nehru opposed the creation of a separate Punjabi-language state, as Punjab was predominately comprised of Hindi-speaking Hindu Punjabis (Rai 2011: 4). After this perceived betrayal, Punjabi-Sikh politics became devoted to issues of language, self-determination, and religious freedom.

Punjab finally became a Sikh majority state in 1966 after the success of the Punjabi Subha Morcha, a campaign that led to the jailing of 40,000 Sikhs (Rai 2011: 4). Sikhs had vowed to only fight in the 1965 Indo-Pak War if India granted them their own majority state, and the government caved. The price, however, was the separation of Haryana from Punjab and the granting of additional lands to Himachal Pradesh (5).

In 1973, the Akali Dal raised the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, which sought greater autonomy for the state of Punjab and for the rights of Sikhs to practice and disseminate their faith (Deol 2019: 191; Rai 2011: 5). The ASR also demanded greater water rights for farm irrigation, for the official recognition of the Punjabi language in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, and Jammu and Kashmir, for greater social support for agricultural and industrial workers and for equal access to education across all classes in Punjab (Longowal 1978). Despite much of the ASR being framed in transparently pro-statist language, the Indian government considered the resolutions radical, communal, and even secessionist (Rai 2011: 6). The ASR was put forth again in 1978 and again was not passed – a failure that led to the rise of a more radical Sikh politics (Ibid).

The year 1984 is the year that the call for Sikh autonomy transformed into one for sovereignty. This was the year that, after the Indian government had successfully branded Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's armed movement in the Golden Temple Complex as terrorist, Indira Gandhi ordered Operation Bluestar. Gurdwaras were desecrated, Sikh men were targeted, Punjab became a police state, and the government quelled yet another burgeoning rebellion with lethal force (14–15). For many Sikhs, the attack on the Golden Temple crystallized the desire for a separate state and convinced them of Brahmanical Hinduism's desire to erase them (25).

On January 26, 1986, a Sarbat Khalsa (United Khalsa) gathering of thousands of Sikhs at Akal Takht Sahib unanimously declared that freedom was a basic right of Sikhs (Deol 2019: 193). Khalistan was formally declared on April 29, 1986 (Birinder Singh 2016: 194). The Five Member Panthic Committee that represented the Sarbat Khalsa declared that Khalistan would stand against Brahmanism and caste, against untouchability and gender-based discrimination, for a socialistic distribution of wealth, and for the cultivation of universal education and literacy (194–195). The Akali government led by Surjit Singh Barnala, wanting to distance itself from the separatist movement, ordered Operation Black Thunder to flush out the militants in the Golden Temple Complex (Bhupinder Singh 2006: 843).

A Sarbat Khalsa held in 1987 endorsed armed struggle for the liberation of all linguistic and religious minorities in India and for the liberation of oppressed peoples all around the world (Birinder Singh 2011: 201). Pro-Khalistani groups like the Khalistan Liberation Force and Khalistan Zindabad Force ran operations in India and established chapters in the West. At the same time, the Council of Khalistan and World Sikh Organization lobbied Western governments to recognize Sikh sovereignty, the former even speaking in front of the UNPO in 1993 (Purewal 2011: 1137; UNPO 1993: 25).

The Khalistani movement in India was violently clamped down, and its chapters in diaspora have been extensively surveilled. Khalistani organizations are continually banned in India, and groups like Babbar Khalsa International and International Sikh Youth Federation were banned in the US, UK, and Canada promptly after 9/11 (Purewal 2011: 1139). The Akali Dal began working in coalition with the Hindu right-wing BJP in 1997 (Bhupinder Singh 2006: 844). This tenuous alliance has all but neutered the ability of the Akali Dal to play identity politics in contemporary Punjab (Deol 2019: 201). The failure of the movement for Sikh autonomy-turned-sovereignty haunts the post-1984 generation, which often has to suppress its beliefs in order to not be a target (Nijhawan 2016: 195).

The issue with discussing any form of Sikh sovereignty in India is that no such thing has ever been allowed to exist, regardless of if it is based in democracy, socialism, communism, or *gurmata*. Sikhs have been confronted with the cruel reality that, no matter which Western/secular/liberal language they use for advocating for any form of self-determination, they are always seen as religious, non-modern, and non-deserving of freedom. Khalistan has been equated with fanatical terror. While the lives of Sikhs in the West have been nowhere near as violent, the pressures of absorption, assimilation, and erasure still weigh heavily on the diaspora.

Sikhs in the West: Recognition and Regulated Inclusion

Sikh movements in the West have had to campaign for recognition and advocate for special accommodation in exchange for their political agency. Rita Kaur Dhamoon calls this trade-off regulated inclusion, noting how inclusion can be a fraught pursuit because it can reproduce the hegemony of the center and limit the rights of minorities by circumscribing their identities to certain state-sanctioned, depoliticized markers of difference (2013: 7–8). Moreover, religious minorities may end up viewing the state as a benevolent host at the expense of solidarities with other minorities. Diasporic Sikh identity, similarly, has been essentialized to a series of key points: the turban and the right to keep unshorn hair, the ability to identify with transnational movements, and the desire to be accommodated within nations.

The examples in this section draw from cases in the UK, Canada, and the USA, where Sikhs have navigated varying degrees of multiculturalist or assimilationist policy according to the political and racial climate of each context. Framed as a question: does “Sikh” refer to an identity, a religion, a philosophy, an ethnic group, a race, or a nation? While Sikhs may internally debate their status in more *gurmata*-derived terms (such as *Khalsa panth*, *qaum*, or *shabad-guru*), their encounter with the West and the anglophone conception of governmentality forces them to work in the language of the majority as a discrete, bounded group (Mandair 2015: 179). This translation inherently limits their sovereign potential by denying them the right to their own philosophies within any public arena.

Britain

Sikhs have been intertwined with Britain since the British annexed the Sikh kingdom in 1849 and were enlisted in the British imperial army (Sian 2013: 45; Axel 2001: 2). Sikh colonial laborers were sent to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania starting in the late nineteenth century, and Sikh soldiers in the Raj numbered over 100,000 during World War I – and as high as “one-sixth of the fighting forces of the Indian empire” (Singh and Tatla 2006: 15; Bhachu 1985: 21; East India Sedition Committee 1918: 60 in Sohi 2014: 9). Following Indian independence, the UK passed the British Nationality Act of 1948, which allowed citizens of Commonwealth countries (including India) to work and settle in the UK (Singh and Tatla 2006: 50). This first period of migration was predominately

comprised of Jat (landowning/agricultural) Sikhs from Punjab who worked in the laboring class upon arriving in Britain. This first wave lasted until the restrictions enacted by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, by which year Sikhs in the UK numbered around 16,000 (Agnihotri 1986: 19; Singh and Tatla 2006: 53). The subsequent period of Africanization in mid-1960s Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda expelled laborers of Indian ancestry and sent as many as 200,000 ethnic South Asians to Britain, despite the UK's concurrent passing of even more stringent immigration acts (Agnihotri 1986: 20).

As Gurharpal Singh outlines, “the early Sikh settlers [in Britain] tended to discard exterior symbols of their faith,” cutting their hair and only wearing turbans in gurdwaras or on special occasions (Gurharpal Singh 2005: 158). The influx of East African Sikhs – who had a higher attachment to the physical markers of *Sikhi* than their Punjabi Jat counterparts – increased both the pride in and visibility of the turban in British society (Ibid). Though the turban itself is not one of the essential markers of Sikh faith, Singh writes,

for most non-Sikhs the turban is synonymous with Sikhs and because of this association it has become the premier symbol of communal identity and of its honour, whereas an inability to wear it is a sign of collective dishonour.

(158–159)

Beginning with the turban and continuing to the kirpan, each subsequent generation of Sikhs in the UK has waged political campaigns to expand the right to public expression of Sikhs – to define, through British law, the constitutive elements of Sikh identity. These campaigns coincide with various iterations of the Race Relations Acts in 1965, 1968, 2000, and 2003; the creation for the Commission for Racial Equality in 1976; the designation of Sikhs as an ethnic group in 1983; the Criminal Justice Act in 1988; and anti-terrorism measures passed since 9/11 (160, 167).

Gurharpal Singh (2005) outlines four turban campaigns: the first surrounding the rights of transport workers to wear turbans in 1959 Manchester and 1967 Wolverhampton (159), the second to grant Sikh motorcyclists the right to wear turbans instead of helmets based on a 1973 law (160), the third a father's appeal to the Commission on Racial Equality in 1976 because his son was barred admission to a Birmingham school for wearing a turban (162), and the fourth over safety helmets at construction sites (163). Each case in Singh's article, which ranged from three to ten years to process, led to a turban exemption. The case surrounding Birmingham Sikh student Gurinder Singh Mandla even led to a ruling by the House of Lords that redefined Sikhs as a distinct ethnic group (Ibid).

After a series of race riots in the 1970s and 1980s, British minorities banded together in a multi-ethnic political coalition. But ethnic and religious groups have found themselves continuously splintered and pit against one another since then. Dividing events between South Asian minorities have included an Indian Airlines flight hijacking by Sikh militants in 1981, the Air India bombing of 1985, and the diasporic arm of the Khalistan movement, 9/11 and 7/7, and the rise of the BJP and pro-Hindu right wing groups in Britain (Gurharpal Singh 2005: 165–167; Bakrania 2013: 189; John 2019). Throughout these events, Sikhs have varyingly been viewed as a religious minority wanting to fit into British society, or a transnational political body whose ties to a homeland continuously arouse suspicion by the state.

Despite being a relatively small minority, Sikhs have been at the forefront on debates over identity politics, religious exemptions, and challenges to secular and anti-religious styles of governance. Decades of this process of challenge, lobbying, and change have granted Sikhs greater freedom of expression but in ways that have ultimately pigeonholed them into boxes they themselves asked the state for (Singh and Shani 2015: 276). This process has entrenched Sikhs in political games wherein

the voice of a few connected Sikh politicians and activist groups are treated by the government as a representative for all Sikhs in the nation (Hundal 2019). The Sikh representatives are then pit against Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish representatives; during the 2019 parliamentary elections, UK and Commonwealth Chief Rabbi Ephraim accused the Labour Party of being anti-Semitic (Ibid.). The Hindu Council UK supported this statement, adding that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was anti-Hindu because he didn't support India's takeover of Kashmir (Asian Image 2019). In response, Bhai Amrik Singh, chair of the Sikh Federation – the foremost Sikh political group in the UK – accused the state of conceding more ground to Muslims and Jewish people in racism cases. Prime Minister Boris Johnson ultimately capitalized on these divisions, extolling Islamophobia to attract the Hindu vote bloc (John 2019). These interreligious identity politics have been exacerbated and exploited by politicians (Asian Image 2019).

Contemporary British Sikhs therefore fall at the axis of several points of intersection. First, they have embedded themselves so deeply in British politics that their right to self-expression is beholden to the state. Second, their transnational allegiances – especially those for Khalistan – still peek out, yet those, too, are issues that can be picked off by British politicians. Finally, and perhaps most crucial, is that British Sikhs, throughout the process of gaining agency in Britain, have inadvertently fallen back into the colonial era divide-and-conquer tactics that pit the major religious communities of South Asia against each other under the British Raj.

North America

Sikhs in the US and Canada have faced comparable situations in which their pursuit for inclusion has led to legislative action. For example, after a campaign led by the Sikh Coalition, the US Army granted Sikh soldiers a turban exemption in January of 2017 (Dickstein 2017). In October of 2018, Ontario joined BC, Alberta, and Manitoba in the list of provinces that allow turban exemptions for motorcyclists (The Canadian Press 2018).

Sikhs have been politically engaged as long as they have been in North America, circulating anti-British colonial publications in San Francisco, Oakland, and Vancouver as early as 1907 (Sohi 2014: 10). Canadian military intelligence officer Rowland Britain urged the government to begin surveilling Sikh gurdwaras for anticolonial activity starting in 1908 (Sohi 2014: 9). The pro-Indian independence *Ghadar* Party raised the funds that opened the USA's first gurdwara in Stockton, California, in 1912 (5). In 1914, 376 Indian passengers traveled in the Komagata Maru steamship from Calcutta to Vancouver to challenge Canada's continuous journey provision, which mandated that immigrants could only enter Canada if they were coming from their country of origin – even if they were coming from the United States (13). The ship purposefully docked at multiple colonial ports between India and Canada to circulate anticolonial literature – the same literature that *ghadarites* distributed throughout West Coast gurdwaras, which British colonial officials were surveilling throughout the empire (14). The passengers were denied entry into Vancouver, turned away after two months, and attacked by police when they returned to the town of Budge Budge, near Calcutta (16).

Just over a century later, Sikhs in North America have had to navigate simultaneous senses of non-belonging and belonging according to the politics of the moment. This dynamic is an inherent problem of multiculturalism, which, especially in Canada, encourages immigrants to maintain political and economic ties to their homelands and connections to their mother tongues. At the same time, immigrants who are not assimilated quite enough – and often, those who wear physical markers of difference – are viewed as disloyal to the state (Satzewich 2008: 46). As Rita Kaur Dharmoon writes, “It is argued, accommodation of ethnic or religious minorities fosters self-imposed

segregation of immigrants and promotes ethnic enclaves, with the effect of undermining national and social unity” (2013: 11).

The result of this positioning is a balancing act between belonging to the nation while also maintaining transnational ties – the latter of which is constantly subject to criticism. When Brampton MPP Harinder Malhi led a motion in the Ontario Assembly in April 2017 to recognize the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi’s assassination as a genocide, *Hindustan Times* called the move a “body blow” to “relations between Canada and India” (Bhattacharyya 2017). Canadian New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh has received continuous scrutiny in both Canadian and Indian media for his ties to pro-Khalistan figures and for his refusal to pin the 1985 Air India bombing on the Babbar Khalsa (Smith 2017). Sikhs in Canada are scrutinized when their political identifications step outside what the Canadian state and its trading partners allow.

Tragedy and profiling force Sikhs to argue that they belong in national fabrics. In the aftermath of the Oak Creek, Wisconsin, gurdwara shooting on August 5, 2012, Sikhs in media found themselves repeating a familiar set of tropes: that Sikhs are good, peace-loving Americans, that Sikhs have long been the targets of mistaken identity, and that spreading education about *Sikhi* can prevent further violence (Balbir Singh 2013: 252). The same day of the shooting, the CNN Belief Blog published a piece detailing basics about the Sikh faith, touching on all the important points that portray the Sikh faith as positively and peacefully as possible: “the world’s fifth most popular religion,” “Everyone is the same,” basics about Guru Nanak, the turban and beard, Punjab, and tolerance (Almasy 2012). In a piece by Moni Basu three days later, one Sikh man described how he is a proud American who is not a radical Muslim, who wears the turban as a marker of identity (Basu 2012). Balbir K. Singh notes how violence inflicted on minorities “is apprehended as always intelligible,” as though living under the constant threat of danger is simply part and parcel of being an American minority (Balbir Singh 2013: 253).

Within this game of violent roll call, Sikhs – predominately turban-wearing men – end up rearticulating the constitutive elements of their identities in an effort to avoid future violence. When Texas police officer Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal was shot dead during a traffic stop, he was memorialized for being one of the first turban-wearing police officers in the force (Glenza 2019). Dhaliwal had been granted permission to wear a turban as part of his uniform, an allowance he called “a very American thing to do” (Ibid). As Balbir K. Singh writes, “These represent the ways in which Sikhs have, on the whole, traded in political space in a critical conversation on the racial violence against raced/religious communities, like the Muslim American community, and instead strived for visibility and national compassion” (256). Sikhs have sought to normalize their markers of difference so that they may be treated the same.

This campaign for acceptance-via-visibility seems to mostly crop up when Sikhs are responding to negative attention, such as when NDP leader Jagmeet Singh was told in secular Quebec to “cut his turban” off to “look like a Canadian” in October of 2019 (The Canadian Press 2019). This instance followed a familiar similar script, beginning with the singling out of the turban, the defense of it, and the articulation that Sikhs are otherwise just like everyone else. A deeper call for belonging came in November of 2019 when beloved hockey broadcaster Don Cherry said that immigrants should not wear poppy pins to commemorate those who died in World War I. *Hockey Night in Canada: Punjabi Edition* founder Parminder Singh responded on CBC Radio, offering a brief history of Sikh service in the First World War – including his great-grandfather’s – while also expressing his deep respect for Cherry (CBC Radio 2019). Again, Sikh belonging was articulated on the grounds of sameness.

Sikhs in the diaspora thus perform a dual belonging that mirrors their status as the multinational diaspora fitting itself within the structures of multicultural governance. They are accommodated

in nation-states so long as their pursuit for greater agency does not substantively alter the fabric of the nation. If their actions are ever perceived as an overstep, they must then double down on their patriotism and allegiance to each state, lest their loyalty be questioned. Like so many other national minorities, their cultural, ideological, and territorial sense of sovereignty is circumscribed by the power structures of the nation-state.

Conclusion

Using numerous cases of Sikhs pursuits for agency and accommodation, this chapter has demonstrated how sovereignty is a power that states consolidate and monopolize based on how governments see fit. Sikhs, accordingly, have had to interface with such constructions as governance, secularity, and multiculturalism – frameworks that force them to translate their being into an anglo-phone frame. As a result, Sikh sovereignty and any allegiances of Sikhs to networks transnational, diasporic, or fundamentalist are viewed as a threat to the self-proclaimed moral and ideological supremacy of the West. Native Sikh concepts are deemed “religious” and therefore non-modern, and Sikhs subjectivity is reduced to a mere series of markers of identity and difference (Mandair 2015: 186). Like countless other minorities, survival in the nation-state is bought, bargained for, and negotiated through a series of exchanges: agency in exchange for protection, belief in exchange for accommodation, subjectivity in exchange for safety.

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SIKHS AND MULTICULTURALISM

Rita Kaur Dhamoon

Introduction

Over recent decades, contemporary Western politics has consistently framed a wide range of events and struggles as “multicultural,” including debates about modes of dress in public places, language policy, religious freedom, education policy, court procedures, and immigration. For example, in the US, following the August 2012 racist attacks at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, questions were asked about whether Sikh Americans were the latest to be persecuted under the model of US multiculturalism, or whether they should be more deeply integrated into the American melting pot of assimilation (Mehta 2013: 235). In Canada, accommodation of the *kirpan* in Toronto courtrooms on the one hand and bans on the *kirpan* on the other have led to public debate that multiculturalism has gone too far. In 2004, in the UK, the so-called *Behzti* affair generated public disturbances and death threats against a Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti because her play included a controversial scene set in a gurdwara involving rape, physical abuse, and murder (Crow 2007; Grillo 2007); while supporters of the play said the cancellation was an affront to freedom of speech, critics saw it as an attack on their religious rights. Although non-Western societies like modern India have engaged in similar debates, other frames of reference are typically used instead of multiculturalism, such as legal pluralism (Dusche 2004).

Often times, the usage of “multiculturalism” across Western contexts cuts across four different meanings: multiculturalism as a demographic fact; multiculturalism as an ideology about the appropriate balance between unity and diversity; multiculturalism as a process for ethnocultural-religious minorities to articulate their demands, and a process for state actors to manage minority claims; and multiculturalism as a policy or piece of legislation implemented by governments. While radical forms of multiculturalism seek to challenge Eurocentrism and to shift from a logic of oppression to a logic of resistance (Lugones 2014), the more predominant form of multiculturalism in the West is rooted in liberalism. Liberal multiculturalists tend to acknowledge that the State is not neutral in its recognition of ethnic, cultural, and religious claims and that a strictly secular divide between private religion and the public sphere undermines individual freedoms (Eisenberg 2007; Kymlicka 1995; Modood 2007). Advocates of liberal multiculturalism vary in scope and strategy, but they all offer various ways to extend inclusion while also simultaneously maintaining the integrity of liberal institutions and practices and promoting national/social unity. As Dhamoon notes,

Though varied in their normative positions and in terms of the practices they advocate, liberal multicultural theorists broadly claim that the equal treatment of “minorities” requires public institutions to acknowledge, rather than ignore or downplay, cultural particularities. . . . Three specific ideas typify this approach: first, because the state does not respond impartially to all individuals and groups, people are not and must not be treated identically; second, liberal views of the self and freedom must be broadened so as to acknowledge the importance of social recognition because individuals are not constituted transculturally or ahistorically; and third, the fabric of social and/or national unity must be maintained while diversity is accommodated.

(2009: 3)

It is liberal versions of multiculturalism that has informed policies and practices in Western contexts, both for ethno-religious minorities and for agents of the state. This has been through formal laws, institutionalized practices of multicultural education, official government statements, as well as non-state discourses (e.g., the United Colours of Benetton advertising campaign).

This chapter considers three ways in which liberal multiculturalism has become relevant to Sikhs in Western contexts. The first is adopted by Sikhs as a process to articulate and advance ethno-cultural-religious claims and values. The second approach is rooted in multiculturalism as a governance tool used by state actors to manage difference and consolidate dominant conceptions of the nation-state. The third approach is a rejection of liberal multiculturalism because it cannot go far enough in confronting or transforming racism against Sikhs and other non-white peoples.

I Multiculturalism as a Process to Articulate Ethno-Cultural-Religious Claims and Values

Multiculturalism stands as a process by which ethnocultural and religious communities can articulate their values, claims, and demands for institutional accommodation, removing discrimination, for protecting cultural rights, and for improving intergroup encounters. Multiculturalism is also a process used by state actors to manage the balance between cultural diversity and social unity.

Multiculturalism as a Sikh Value

Arguably, multiculturalism is a value upheld by many Sikhs. Arvinder Singh (2012) contends that a Sikh vision of multicultural society is in tune with liberal democratic principles, including cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity. He goes as far as to state that the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy Sikh scripture, and Khalsa society provide a unique model of competent culture and peaceful coexistence. He states,

Guru Nanak . . . provided a remedy for religious intolerance, racial arrogance and false pretense of cultural superiority. He ushered a new era in the history of mankind and gave the eternal message of peace, coexistence and harmony. . . . Sikhism later the ideational foundation for the erection of a pluralistic edifice of polity and brought out country to the threshold of modern value pattern . . . based on a version of secularism that is essentially different from the Western concept.

(Singh A. 2012: 71)

The Sikh Gurus, according to Singh, suffered martyrdoms to uphold the religious liberties of the people and later repeated emphasis on the quality of mankind, in which a plurality of cultures and

civilizations were guided by divine providence. In a state, spiritual connection or differences were to be dissolved. The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, like the first, emphasized the importance of removing geographical barriers, caste prejudices, and cultural pride. At the time of the creation of the Khalsa, all *Panj Piyare* (Five Beloved Ones) belonged to different castes in India and came from different regions of the Indian subcontinent (Singh A. 2012: 72). The Gurus wanted to create a classless, casteless society where individuals enjoyed the freedom of expression and freedom of religion. So as well as tolerance, this understanding of Sikhi fits in with the liberal multicultural model of respecting diversity in the name of unity, for according to Singh, the goal was to transcend all barriers and boundaries to create a universal humanity.

The tolerance and openness that marks multiculturalism is evident in Sikh teachings. For instance, the division and structure of the *Darbar Sahib* (the Golden Temple) is based on for open doors, with the tradition of *langar* (free kitchen), which is meant to signify quality and coexistence of all cultures and people. Furthermore, as Singh (2012: 74) notes, the message of *gurbani* is one of equal recognition and respect all cultures, cross-cultural understanding, and in social and ethnic harmony. Sikhi seeks to create a multifaith environment to find the true meaning of belonging one human family. In short, “Khalsa is an epitome of teachings of Sikh Gurus, in fact, the vanguard of multicultural society” (Singh A. 2012: 72).

Despite these linkages to liberal multicultural ideology, there are some key tenets of Sikhi that depart from a liberal multicultural conception of the world. Sikhi conceives of religious evolution as one that is not limited to autonomy of the individual. Moreover, it entails a socialist vision of the world in which love and equality, human dignity injustice are tied up with individual welfare.

Multiculturalism as an Ideological and Policy Tool for the State to Manage Diversity

The concept of multiculturalism has attained “a pronounced significance for the Sikh diaspora in the twenty-first century, especially in the debate between assimilation, hyphenation and pluralism in a democratic society” (Mehta 2013: 236). The operating ideology of liberal multiculturalism is that institutional recognition of ethnocultural religious diversity is essential to national and social unity. In these understandings, multiculturalism is necessary because the neutrality of the state has failed to integrate minorities. In particular, the state should arbitrate demands of minorities in ways that are consistent with liberal democracy. The state should extend tolerance to Sikhs for the sake of pluralizing and democratizing public spaces. Cultural pluralism would enhance the integration of Sikhs (and other non-Western non-whites) while enabling the state to take an active role in managing the extent and limits of diversity. As Modood (2013) argues in the context of Muslims and multiculturalism in the UK, multiculturalism has the potential to also foster social cohesion and civic inclusion, if it is allowed to flourish alongside moderate secularism; the same could, arguably, apply to Sikhs in countries with multicultural policies.

Multiculturalism as a Policy Tool for Sikhs to Seek Accommodations and Inclusion

Multiculturalism in Britain, Canada, and Australia has been used to frame Sikh claims and demands over modes of dress, language policy, religious freedom, education policy, and court procedures. In Britain and Canada, Sikhs have deployed various frameworks of liberal multiculturalism to gain exemptions for wearing safety equipment (Joppke 1999). One of the most well-known cases involves Baltej Singh Dhillon, who, in 1988, fought for the right to wear his turban as part of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) uniform, rather than the traditional Mountie flat-brimmed Stetson hat. While Dhillon met all of the entrance requirements to join the RCMP, the dress code

forbade his bear and turban, both of which were key aspects of his Sikh religion. After a three-year battle to change the RCMP dress code, and much public outcry, Dhillon joined the RCMP in 1991. For many Sikhs, this was made possible because of Canada's official policy on multiculturalism.

In other Canadian cases, multiculturalism also framed Sikh claims to wear the kirpan in public schools (*Ontario Human Rights Commission and Harbhajan Singh Pandori v. Peel Board of Education*, 1991) and on airplanes (*Nijjar v. Canada* 3000, 1996), and turbans in competitive soccer (Mehta 2013: 236–237) and in Legion Halls (Walton-Roberts 2011). In Britain, discourses of multiculturalism, or more precisely ethnic minority rights, have been used by Sikhs to gain exceptions for turbaned bus conductors, motorcyclists, construction workers (Singh G. 2005: 159–164).

Even in the US context, where multiculturalism is approached as a melting pot rather than the more celebrated multicultural mosaic, commentators have called for culturally competent practices and multicultural models of treatment to be used in counselling Sikhs. In the context of Sikh trauma over the partition of India, the 1984 Delhi riots, and racial profiling in the post 9/11 era, Alhuwalia and Alimchandani (2013) argue that it is necessary for practicing psychologists to be competent in the complexity of Sikh cultural history and current ostracism, Sikhs beliefs and symbols (such as the *Guru Granth Sahib*), and Sikh religious values (such as *hukam* and *karma*).

II Multiculturalism as a Process of Governmentality/Nation-State Building

Discourses of multiculturalism have been operationalized in relation to Sikhs as a way for the state to regulate otherness and secure hegemonic formations of the nation-state. Certainly state interventions that are in the service of building the nations-state can include the protection of rights of individuals and groups in the capacities to fully realize their citizenry. Yet in order to maintain its own sovereignty, the state activates agents as necessary gatekeepers of social differences.

Sikhs as Model Minorities

Sikhs have been constructed by the state, and indeed by some Sikhs, as model minorities. This is true not only in countries well-known for multiculturalism, such as Canada, where Sikhs are placed as a subset of Indo-Canadians, but also in places such as Singapore, where Sikhs are preferred over Chinese migrants (Dusenbery 1997: 744). Model minorities are deemed to be those marginalized groups who are economically upwardly mobile, follow heterosexual norms of the nuclear family and marriage, and less criminally inclined than other religious groups. While this model minority discourse may well give some Sikhs social and economic access opportunities that are otherwise withheld, ultimately, the model minority is always subject to the dominant criteria of being welcomed or criticized and, ultimately, a system of hierarchies that serve white dominance.

We have seen model minority discourses operationalized in multiple ways. In Britain and Canada, those Sikhs fighting for the right to wear the turban and kirpan in public places have done so in ways to meet the standards of dominant society (Bebber 2017; Dhamoon 2013). During a case involving a 12-year-old Sikh boy in grade 7, Gurbaj Multani, who was told that he could not wear his kirpan at school because some parents were worried about the safety of their children, his lawyer and various interveners, including the World Sikh Organization (WSO), deployed the language of multiculturalism to defend his right. At the Supreme Court hearing of *Multani v. Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys*, the WSO presented the kirpan as an emblem of resistance to oppression and the struggle of equality, distancing the kirpan from any martial implications it may have once had so that it coalesced with Canadian multiculturalism and Québec social progressive ideas (Stoker 2007: 817). The WSO also argued that the kirpan could be worn under some conditions to meet safety

concerns, including sheathing the kirpan and having it safely sewn in sturdy cloth underneath clothing. In other words, there had to be limits put on this religious symbol that met the requirements of mainstream interpretations of rationality and safety. And indeed the Supreme Court decision in 2006 specifically emphasized these safety precautions as consistent with Canada's multicultural character when it ruled in favor of Multani (Dhamoon 2013).

Sikhs have also been aligned, and indeed some aspired to the model minority myth following the increase of Islamophobia against Muslims and Arabs in the wake of September 11, 2001. In the context of the UK, Katy Pal Sian (2013a; 2013b) has tracked the ways in which Sikhs have often been mistaken for being Muslim and have actively worked to distance themselves from Muslims and from Islam, which is deemed to be a threat, while aligning themselves closer to the national majority community by subscribing to Islamophobic discourse. In this regard, against the backdrop of multiculturalism, some Sikhs have adopted many of the same racial pathologies that are widely embedded within Western culture and its antipathy towards Muslims and Islam. This Sikh variant of Islamophobia comes in many forms, but one of the most dangerous is the notion that assimilation of model minorities is desirable.

The discourse of the model minority Sikh is also deployed in the context of corporate multiculturalism, or what Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2002: 169) refer to as selling diversity: "We buy the skills, talents, and ethnic backgrounds of men and women are commodified, marketed and build." In the context of the US, compared to black people and indigenous people, Sikhs (and other Asians) are identified as exemplars for other ethnic minorities to aspire to be (Prashad 2001). This is especially so when Sikhs are viewed as hard-working, well educated, law-abiding, and upwardly mobile as opposed to lazy and welfare-dependent compared to other minorities. The production and organization of these racial hierarchies serve to manage and govern the superiority of whiteness while also bringing about financial prosperity to the state.

Regardless of how the model minority is constructed, it is always in relation to a particular normalized understanding of the "proper" citizen and subject. So when a Sikh boy wants to wear overt religious symbols at school, he must do so in ways that do not undermine the sensibilities of white bourgeois society. When Sikhs distance themselves from Muslims and Arabs and enact Islamophobia, they do so to secure their sense of belonging in the nation, knowing that banishment from the nation can encompass job discrimination, bodily violence, incarceration, and detainment. And when Sikhs claim to be economically successful compared to other minorities, we simply discipline ourselves into capitalist modes of subjectivity. In other words, in reality, there is no such thing as a model minority; however integrated Sikhs might become, they are still marked by the difference, as outsiders of the nation-state (Kaur 2014).

Constructing Sikh Difference as Culturally Backward, Sexist, and Misogynist

Multiculturalism has also served as a backdrop to justify claims about gender equality. Susan Moller Okin's (1999) now infamous piece "Is multiculturalism bad for women?" advanced stereotypes about non-white ethnic-religious minority groups as backward, sexist, and misogynist in ways that falsely affirmed the dominant Western society was progressive and gender friendly. In framing multiculturalism as antifeminist, Okin reified cultural stereotypes and left little option but for Sikh women to choose their basic individual rights over their cultural group rights.

Okin's concern is not without basis, since group rights can substantially limit the capacities of women, and religions can be oppressive to women. But Okin relies on stereotypes about people's from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia is distinctly patriarchal, whereas, according to her, Western liberal cultures may still practice forms of sex discrimination, but on the whole,

illiberal cultures' women are guaranteed the same freedoms and opportunities as men. While other feminists, such as Shachar (2001), provide theories of jurisdictional authority that would create a better system of checks and balances between cultural demands and women's rights, Okin reaffirms the conservative perspective that multiculturalism is no friend of women's rights. Examples that are typically cited (without evidence) are acts of domestic violence within Sikh communities, which portray Sikh men as intrinsically oppressive and Sikh women totally lacking in agency, such that noncultural explanations of violence are rejected, and Western society is deemed to be gender-friendly.

In the context of Islamophobia, multiculturalism is also deemed to be threatening to key dominant values. In Quebec, controversies over multicultural accommodation have tended to focus on Islam and Muslim women wearing the niqab, whereby the niqab is deemed to threaten the benevolence of Quebec *laïcité* (secularism) and gender equality. For example, in July 2018, a Quebec law banning the wearing of face coverings for people giving or receiving state services came into effect. Such Islamophobia has also impacted Sikhs (of all genders) who wear turbans. The specter of religious fundamentalism, supposedly marked by the turban, is deemed to threaten Quebec's values of liberty, tolerance, and civilization, and gender equality is framed as a fundamental Quebecois value that is undermined by backward cultures of non-Western religious people (Leroux 2013). Both justifications were used in 2018, when the Quebec government passed the polarizing Bill 21 to ban the wearing of religious symbols by government employees and ban access to public services when wearing overt religious symbols (such as the municipal transit system and the legal system). As legal counsel for the World Sikh Organization (Abedi 2019) noted in June 2019, the law not only threatens actual and potential public workers and users of public services, but some private sector employers have also reportedly told Sikh women that they could not wear a turban on the job (even though Bill 21 does not apply to private sector employees). As well as claiming that multicultural accommodation generates insecurity for Quebec (read: white) people, supporters of the law claim that they are protecting the rights of individual women within religious minority groups, contrary to what Sikh and Muslims are saying. And yet, as Dhamoon (2010) argues, it is non-white minorities seeking to practice their religion who are, in reality, made insecure by hegemonies of gendered whiteness.

Sikhs as Extremist/Threat/Terrorist to National Security

While being constructed as a model minority who can be "good" citizens of the Western nation, Sikhs are also simultaneously subject to negative stereotypes that fix them into a different set of boundaries – that of the extremist or terrorist who threatens white national identity. One of the contemporary questions haunting Sikhs in Western nations has always been whether multiculturalism unifies or fragments the nation (Ashcroft and Bevir 2018). The question tends to be organized around an either/or situation: does multiculturalism promote or inhibit extremism and terrorism? Sikhs have been situated within this discourse as ethnocultural subjects that actually or potentially threaten national security. In the Dutch case, such arguments led to a drastic break with multiculturalism (Entzinger 2007). But these claims are not only being made by non-Sikhs but also prominent Sikhs, such as Ujjal Dosanjh, who, in 2010, while a member of the legislature in Canada, made unsubstantiated claims about a second and third generation of Sikh extremists (Kaur 2014: 76). Nor are such discourses of Sikh extremism new. As Loveleen Kaur (2014) notes, the use of "extremist" for domination can be traced back to the early 1900s in the work of the Ghadar party in North America, which was constructed by the British as a threatening revolutionary menace. It was then later used in the context of the 1980s in which Sikh groups in Punjab mobilized a movement for a

separate state in India, Khalistan, and again after the death of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi following the 1984 attack of the Golden Temple by the Indian government, and yet again after the 1985 bombing of an Air India flight 182 by Sikhs in Canada.

On the one hand, there are some such as Will Kymlicka (2007), who contends that terrorism exists even where there is no multiculturalism, and that in fact the more multicultural minorities are accommodated and integrated into the mainstream, the more they will contribute to unified nation and society. On the other hand, for those who subscribe to the clash of civilizations thesis, when ethnocultural and religious minorities are allowed to practice their private beliefs in public, this contaminates society seeking to be secular. In the case of Sikhs, the notion of threat and danger echoes constructions of Muslims and Arabs as extremists and terrorists, but the two are not the same – for it is actual Muslims and Arabs that security agents target. Nonetheless, Sikhs raise the specter of threat when they wear overt religious symbols such as the turban or the kirpan. The kirpan is treated as an article of clothing that is removable rather than an article of faith that is constituent to a sense of self and community belonging, and a symbols of defending those facing injustice. Yet Sikhs face cultural racism as a result of Western understandings of the kirpan (Dhamoon 2013: 23). This not only seeks to reaffirm whiteness, but it also situates the *kirpan* as a symbol of backward cultures to be contrasted against the supposed progress of the modern (white) Western world.

As Dhamoon and Abu-Laban (2009) note, this dangerous internal foreigner is

accused of corrupting and threatening “our” national identity; “our” dominant norms of the body politic (e.g. those related to “our” health and population); “our” familial, legal, symbolic, ideological, and economic values; “our” economic agenda and employment opportunities; “our” property rights as well as control of the land and its resources; and “our” public space.

(p. 169)

As subjects marked as internal dangerous foreigners, *kirpan*-carrying Sikhs evoke the specter of threat to the nation, with automatic associations made to extremism and radicalization. This image is fostered by orientalizing ideas about brown men as patriarchal and prone to violence, thus pathologizing Sikh men in universalistic ways. This manifests itself as legitimized surveillance of turbaned peoples, *kirpan*-carrying Sikhs and brown bodies in general, by literally putting bodies through security machines and doing “random” checks as well as socially scrutinizing nonwestern peoples and their religious and cultural practices. As Puar (2008: 71) notes with regards to the turban, constructions of the extremist or terrorist are not dependent on surveying the whole body; rather, the securitization of particular bodies relies on an assemblage of Otherness.

III Multiculturalism as a Mask Over Power Differentials

The third key way that multiculturalism is taken up in relation to Sikhs (and indeed other non-white ethnocultural religious minorities) in Western contexts is by critics who have shown that multiculturalism has become a cover to mask over power differentials and depoliticize the language of race and racism. For these critics, state multiculturalism detracts from more substantial equity issues and fails to challenge racialized inequalities.

(Sikh) Culture Prioritized Over Other Aspects of Life

As Dhamoon (2009) has argued, the concept of culture in multiculturalism does a particular kind of political work that narrows the scope to very particular ethnic groups, historical nations, and

linguistic minorities rather than all cultural groups, especially immigrant minorities as members are assumed to share language, history, and a broad belief system. In this understanding, culture is treated as a bounded entity with essentializing tendencies, despite various kinds of typologies of difference recognized among ethnic, national, and linguistic groups. Multiculturalism has very little to say about Sikhs of mixed-race heritage. Indeed multiculturalism privileges culture as a singular dimensional signifier of difference over modes of racialization, gendering, ability, class, and sexuality (see for example, Kymlicka 1995: 18; Taylor 1994: 52–55). This leads to what black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw (2000) calls intersectional invisibility. It may be that cultural practices may be more easily regulated than issues of racism and racial inequity are to manage for the state. As Kaur (2014: 81) states, “Canada is a multicultural nation but tolerance is not the utopian national identity that is flaunted. Tolerance and stereotypes function as a way to continue the subjugation of populations to ensure their respective positions within the colonial machine are maintained.”

Not Adequately Linked to Racism OR Colonialism

Critics further point out that multiculturalism stands as a proxy for race. As David Scott notes (2003: 103–104), culture has become the most recent way of conceiving and constructing otherness; during the Renaissance period, he states, the non-European other was constructed in relation to Christianity; in the Enlightenment era, the Other was interpreted by distinctions made between European and non-European ignorance; and in the nineteenth century, race was the organizing paradigm of otherness and normalcy. Now, states Scott, “culture has become the greater horizon of difference. It has become, so to speak, the commanding natural language of difference” (2003: 104). The result is that material and historical constructions of Sikh culture and ethnicity by the West are scripted as if they are operating in a race-neutral vacuum.

One of the risks of framing Sikh issues under the rubric of multiculturalism, rather than racism, is that it obscures the ongoing colonial dynamics in which Sikhs (and indeed all peoples in North America and in Australia) are living. Colonial violence continues today through the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the lands and waterways. Certainly, there are some who include indigenous peoples under the umbrella of multiculturalism, but this collapses indigenous peoples as another ethnic minority group rather than as a distinct people whose claims are deeply tied to historic and ongoing connection to the land. These distinctions are important, as Celia Haig Brown (2009) compellingly argues, diasporas are not just moving away from a place but also moving *to* a place in which indigenous people have been subjected to colonialism. As Jodi Byrd (2001) has argued, it is necessary for settlers and arrivants to each acknowledge their own positions within the empire and in relation to indigenous people. These connections between marginalized groups in Western contexts must be more central to Sikh experiences in Anglo-American contexts not least because of our theological commitments to equality and justice for all, but also because Sikhs are benefiting from not being subject to colonial tactics of genocide and ongoing practices that lead to indigenous death and dispossession.

Little Reference to Majority Cultures

Critics also point to the ways in which multiculturalism focuses on cultural minorities, namely, non-Western people who make claims within the boundaries of the West. Although multiculturalists do address the problem of Anglo conformity, they also tend to focus on those whose cultures present difficulty for the state rather than dominant cultures. So rather than shifting the power imbalances between dominant groups and subordinated groups, multiculturalism seeks to simply extend differentiated rights to marginalized cultures. Not only does this homogenize and stabilize Western

societies as modern and Christian, but it also justifies why the state should be preoccupied with, surveilling, and managing those whose demands are seen to threaten national and political unity.

Multicultural practices may be aimed at expanding inclusion of Sikhs into the mainstream, but they do not fundamentally change the conditions that give meaning to that core/mainstream. Indeed the goal of including others into the mainstream falsely assumes that those who are currently included are equally included, even though inclusion is premised on defining the inside and outside such that an inclusive sphere only exists in relation to a survey of exclusion. As Iris Marion Young (2002: 13) argues, inclusion paradoxically depends on the continued denial of itself. Put differently, multiculturalism operates against a backdrop in which “national values” are always and already rooted in monocultural traditions, institutions, and imagery.

Conclusion

In the context of Sikhs, multiculturalism has been approached in at least three different ways:

- Multiculturalism is necessary to advance the ethnocultural and religious interests of the Sikh minority.
- Multiculturalism has gone too far in accommodating Sikh (and other non-Western) religious practices and symbols, at the cost of social and national cohesion.
- Multiculturalism cannot go far enough in addressing gendered racism and colonialism experienced by Sikhs (and other non-Western peoples).

Some have argued that over recent years, there has been a retreat from multiculturalism (Entzinger 2007), while others see merely a recalibration of multiculturalism across the globe (Modood 2007). Regardless, alongside other ethnic and cultural-religious minorities, as well as refugees, indigenous peoples, transgender people, and the poor, Sikhs of all varieties are having to navigate a world in which there is a rise in fascism, anti-immigration, heteropatriarchy, dispossession, racism, and neoliberalism. Despite, or maybe because of, good intentions, multiculturalism is ill-equipped to confront these issues.

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SIKH NATIONALISM

*Gurharpal Singh***Introduction**

There are a few issues that are more vexatious in Sikh studies than Sikh nationalism. The growth of Sikh studies as an interdisciplinary field in the last four decades in the West has not been accompanied by corresponding advances in understanding Sikhs as a national community with its traditions, myths and memoirs, and the politics of self-determination in pursuit of autonomy, and at times, of independent statehood. Barring notable examples (Pettigrew 1995; Dusenbery 1999; Deol 2000; Singh 2000; Shani 2008), most scholars working on Sikhs have tended to steer clear of the thorny question of nationalism with its logical concomitant of an independent Sikh state, preferring instead to focus on identity, Sikhism as a religion, or the minority politics of multiculturalism. Since 1984, this shift has been underpinned by the post-structural turn that has led to the ascendancy of critical theory in the field of Sikh studies and the rejection of militancy that had characterized the turbulent decade after 1984 in which over 30,000 lives were lost in Punjab and the surrounding states in India. This shift has been supported by three related theses: that the Sikhs are a unique community of faith whose tradition remains untranslatable into Western concepts of “religion” or the “nation” (Mandair 2009), that Sikhs and Sikhism must be understood primarily within the Indic tradition as an integral part of Hindu society led by a succession of gurus (*sampradaya*) (Oberoi 1994), and that religion is the primary signifier of the community’s identity and therefore nationalism is alien to Sikhs and Sikhism (Singh-Kaur 2005, 2018). To these arguments, we can add a fourth: the general anathema against nationalism as an ideology since 1945, the rise of religious nationalism after 1979, and more recently, neo-conservative nationalisms in the West that promote patriarchy, racism, and neocolonialism. Within this broad context, therefore, Sikh nationalism has been framed as the illegitimate child of malcontents ill-at-ease with socially complex globalized societies, in other words, those who are on the wrong side of the history of a progressive minority faith tradition that has pioneered the politics of multiculturalism.

However, these developments stand in sharp contrast to the study of Sikh nationalism from the 1950s to the 1970s during the campaigns for a *Punjabi Suba* (a Punjabi-speaking state) and the regional autonomy within the Indian Union following the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) that underpinned the agitational politics of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Paul Brass (1974: 277), in his pioneering work on North India that established the instrumentalist school of nationality

formation, noted that “of all the ethnic groups in north India, the Sikhs come closest to satisfying the definition of a nationality or a nation.” What for Brass had distinguished Sikhs from other groups around then was that they had “succeeded in acquiring a high degree of internal social and political cohesion and subjective awareness” and “achieved political significance as a group within the Indian Union” (277). For Brass, the *Punjabi-Suba* movement was a nationality formation process in which Sikhs were transformed from a *religious* sect into a political *nation* (334). But in this process, Sikh elites played a vital role in the construction of a Sikh national consciousness by selecting the symbols – linguistic, religious, and cultural – that enabled the mobilization to take place. Similarly, for Khushwant Singh there was little doubt about the uniqueness of Sikh nationality: Sikhs as a distinctive community could survive only in a “separate state in which they formed[ed] a compact group; where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory; and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their forefather” (1966: 205). The threat of resurgent Hinduism after independence was so strong that unless the Sikhs had a state of their own, there was “little doubt that before the century has run its course Sikh religion will have become a branch of Hinduism and the Sikhs a part of the Hindu social system” (Singh 1953: 185).

Since the 1950s, methodologically the study of nationalism has undergone a profound transformation (Smith 2001, 2010) with social change at the center of the modernist approaches to explaining the cause and rise of nations and nationalism. Anthropologists like Gellner (1964) drew attention to the role of industrialization in creating nations and nationalism, and coincidentally, Marxist analyses of nationalist movement both in the developed and developing world highlighted the importance of economic and class-based explanations for the rise of such movements (Nairn 1977). At the same time, the political mobilization of non-white minorities in the West (often termed “ethnic” because of their allegedly distinctive cultural characteristics) led anthropologists and sociologists to reflect on the resilience of “race” and “ethnicity” in the developed world. This phenomenon, it was suggested, could be better understood in terms of either primordialism (Shils 1957; Geertz 1963), the innate cultural characteristics of these movements, or instrumentalism (Brass 1974), the outcome of consciously made choices by a group’s elites. The primordialism-instrumentalism divide is a distinction that is common to most approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism.

The late 1970s and the early 1980s witnessed a resurgence of sub-national movements in the West and the developing world that belied the expectation that ethnicity and nationalism would “wither away” with modernization. A.D. Smith’s *Ethnic Revival* (1981) and *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986) were a watershed moment in the study of the subject. In these, and subsequent publications, Smith outlined the ethno-symbolic approach to the origins of nations and nationalism in which their modernity was conceded but the mainspring of nationalist ideology was located in pre-modern cultural attachments such as *ethnies*.¹

While the work of Smith refocused attention on the cultural origins of nations and nationalism, in developing countries the universalising claims of the literature on ethnicity and nationalism were questioned by postcolonial theorists² who argued that scholarship was essentially Euro-centric. How colonialism had subverted the economic and cultural development of the colonized, postcolonial theorists argued, was important to understanding the practical limitation of conceptual categories such as ethnicity, nationalism, and self-determination. Nationalism was consequently regarded as a discourse largely derivative of colonial rule (Chatterjee 1986).

The end of the Cold War in 1989 was marked by two paradoxical developments. First, the onset of globalization³ led to the flow of new migrants from the South to the North who were better connected in their host lands with their homelands by new information and communications technologies. These dense connections gave rise to transnational movements that offered alternative ways of

conceptualizing diasporas and homeland politics that questioned the idea of a nation, how it was imagined and the need for a territorialized homeland (Appadurai 1990; Anderson 1992).

Second, simultaneously there was a rise in religious nationalism.⁴ This nationalism does not merely reflect the preexisting cultures and values of national citizens: it is distinguished by unrelenting hostility to modernity, secularism, the secular state, and the existing international order. It is associated closely with the global religious resurgence that has unleashed new passions and violence symbolized by the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001 (Petito and Hatzopoulos 2003).

Third, alongside this development, there has been a growth of the scholarship in the study of gender and the nation, of “nations and nationalisms as masculine organisations and projects” (Smith 2003: 208). Nationalism as a male phenomenon has led some to argue that men and women have different stakes in nations and nationalism, and this difference has been overlaid not only by male masculinities which perpetuate “Homonalism” but also suppress other social and sexual identities (Paur 2007).

In light of these methodological and political developments, a singular approach to the study of Sikh nationalism appears most unsatisfactory. How, for example, can we integrate the study of the diaspora and Sikh politics in India? If the primary manifestation of Sikh politics is one of identity, an identity that was arguably “constructed” at the end of the nineteenth century (Oberoi 1994), then how can we speak of territorialization and nation-statehood? And as a complex social minority, are Sikhs first and foremost an ethnic group, a nation, or a world religion – or all three?

These are significant challenges that have perhaps deterred scholars from undertaking the detailed task of probing the relationship between these concepts to build a more meaningful analytical framework for understanding Sikh nationalism within the well-established literature on ethnicity, nations, and nationalism. This is all the more surprising because in the late 1970s Mark Juergensmeyer and Gerald Barrier (1979: 2) alerted us to the contradictory social qualities of Sikhs as both a religious and an ethnic group, and Verne Dusenbery (1999) writing on the late 1990s highlighted the competing master narratives of Sikh identity of religion and nation, with the suggestion that Indic cognate terms such as *Panth* and *Qaum* perhaps provided more relevant concepts for the way ahead. Comparatively and empirically, however, this challenge has, for obvious reasons – not least the limited utility of Indic terms outside of South Asia – has been difficult to meet. A more pragmatic response is to examine the salience of modern Sikh identities, how they intersect and overlap, and how in historical and contemporary political formations they match comparative typologies of ethnic conflict management ranging from multiculturalism at the one end to a separate state at the other. In *Sikh Nationalism* (2022), we explore the politics of three Sikh identities – of religion, nation, and as a minority (both in South Asia and globally). We examine the intersections and overlaps between these identities and the way they have determined the community’s search for autonomy and self-determination, though not necessarily always articulating the creation of a separate state.

An Integrated Framework

Following from the preliminary step of identifying the operational social characteristics of the Sikh community, the question arises of the relevant methodological approach. No singular methodology seems appropriate for what Smith has called the “nationalism of small peoples” (1999: 203). This requires the need to address the dilemmas of minorities surrounded by greater national traditions, the importance of diasporas, where they are relevant, and an understanding of religious nationalism in shaping minority nationalism and the character and politics of the greater traditions. Arguably, gender-centric concerns do not necessarily pose such a methodological dilemma and can be

addressed within the relevant case study, though this structural division perhaps opens up a broader debate (Paur 2007).⁵

The main schools of thought in the study of nationalism are modernist (Gellner 1964; Anderson 1991) that view nations and nationalism as a modern phenomenon, the by-product of capitalism, industrialization, and the growth of the modern state with its mass education. Marxist approaches also belong to the modernist school of thought, though they emphasize the primacy of class factors in which nationalism like religions is a state of false consciousness. The utility of these methodologies for the Sikh case has been questioned (Singh and Shani 2022, Ch.1). Smith, who locates himself broadly within the modernist school but highlights the ethno-symbolic origins of nations and nationalism, the significance of the historical symbols of *ethnies*, provides a more fruitful point of departure.⁶ Ethno-symbolism, as the term suggests, is concerned with the subjective identification of peoples with the historical symbols of *ethnies*. In the words of Smith, it seeks to move away from the focus on elites and “enter into and comprehend the ‘inner world’ of ethnicity and nationalism” (2010: 61). In understanding the subject, the “passion and attachments evoked by nations and nationalism is a central problem,” as is the “continuing hold exercised by modern national communities on so many people, even today” (62). For Smith, nationalism is an essential “political ideology with a cultural doctrine at its centre” (1999, 74). It is this cultural core that accounts for the persistence of the “ethnonational bond,” even in highly developed nation-states where it takes the form of cultural nationalism. Simply put, the ethno-symbolic approach places emphasis on the cultural limits to elite manipulation and, by doing so, draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between “elites” and the “masses.” The importance of this approach is on the *long durée* analysis of the persistence of structures and processes by locating *ethnies* and nations in history.

The Sikhs, with their rich symbolic tradition and past that includes the creation of the Khalsa and the myth of election as a “chosen people,” a distinctive identity marked by physical appearance, the rise to political power in the Punjab in the eighteenth century and Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Empire provide an ideal case for ethno-symbolic methodology. While this fit is not without some serious qualifications, notably the capacity of Sikh elites at the end of the nineteenth century to retrospectively “construct” the myths and memories of the nation, scholars working on the community have generally preferred Smith’s ethno-symbolic approach to modernist theories (Deol 2000; Singh 2000; Shani 2008; Singh and Shani 2022). Accordingly, in *Sikh Nationalism* (2022), we draw on ethno-symbolism to explore the inner world of Sikh nationalism, its reformation in the late nineteenth century around the identity of the Khalsa, and its modern political manifestations.

In addition to the ethno-symbolic approach, for the reasons outlined above, *Sikh Nationalism* (2022) draws on three closely related dimensions. First, the narrative of a minority has very much been shaped by the world around the Sikhs, especially in the Punjab. Like the Baluchis, Kashmiris, Nagas, Tamils (in Sri Lanka), and Kurds in the Middle East, the rise of majority nationalisms and nation-state formation around these communities as the principal “other[s],” particularly the nation-building efforts of the Congress and the Muslim League in the Punjab before 1947 has fostered a reactive, minority response for autonomy and self-determination. In the case of the Sikhs, as a small religious minority with a strong religious ethic to neither “dominate nor be dominated,” this narrative has deep historical roots. Modern manifestations of this minority consciousness, even as “dominant minority” during the Sikh empire,⁷ have included the veneration of the Punjab’s social and religious pluralism and, under colonialism, support for political power-sharing and multiculturalism. And within the diaspora, the Sikhs have pioneered campaigns to ensure better protection of minority cultural rights. The idea of Sikhs as a minority, therefore, is central to any discussion of Sikh nationalism: it ranges from a “dominant minority” at the one extreme to diasporic cultural minorities in the West at the other.

Second, the role of the diaspora in the development of Sikh nationalism is integral to any study of the subject. Somewhat unusually, the Sikh diaspora emerged simultaneously with the rise of modern Sikh nationalism, and almost a century later, the diaspora and the homeland remain mutually dependent – a dependence reinforced by common religious institutions and transnational networks of business, family, and religious and nonreligious philanthropy that has remained largely unmapped. This dependence has been overshadowed by the literature after 1984 in which the Sikh diaspora is reinterpreted as an exemplar of long-distance diasporic nationalism (Appadurai 1990; Anderson 1992; Tatla 1999; Axel 2001). While these studies descriptively captured the new activism of migrant communities from the South in the increasingly globalized West, they are unable to explain the rise and fall of Sikh nationalists' activism in the West or India. More seriously, they largely reproduce the official narratives of successive governments of India that portrayed the regional autonomy movement led by the SAD in the Punjab as diaspora and Pakistan-led, to the neglect of the legitimate constitutional, economic, political, and cultural demands. As the recent farmers' agitation in the Punjab and northern India has illustrated (June 2019–November 2021), the diaspora remains a weather vane ever subject to, and dependent on, events from South Asia rather than an independent variable that shapes them (Singh 1999).

Third, the rise of religious nationalism since the end of the Cold War offers a critique of Indian nationalism and the secular state as the guarantor of minority religious rights. Since independence, the Sikh question in Indian politics has posed a sharp counterpoint to Congress's civic conception of nationalism (Nayar 1966). Yet the relative ease with which this vision has been now supplanted by Hindu nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party requires us to rethink the origins of religious nationalism in India before 1947 and how the institutional structures created after 1947 to manage religious diversity worked to reinforce domination and control over religious minorities (van der Veer 1993; Kim 2017). One consequence of this policy was to strengthen the close nexus between religion and nationalism among these communities by frustrating the development of viable civil society, an outcome that has seriously limited the political autonomy of religious minority elites (Kim 2019).

The literature on religious nationalism requires a critique of secularism both as an ideology of nationalism and of the secular state in managing the religious and political demands of the Sikhs in post-1947 India. But it would be misleading to view Sikhism as a political religion *a la* Islam. Instead, the close fusion of religion and nationalism has produced something akin to a sense of “sacred communion” that is “devoted to the cult of authenticity and the ideals of national autonomy, unity and identity in a historic homeland” (Smith 2003b, 254). This unique fusion of religion and attachment to the Punjab helps explain the intensity of feeling, the loyalty, and violence which so often characterizes Sikh nationalism; it also, importantly, accounts for the limits on Sikh elites' ability to manipulate the community's identity for their political ends.

Applying the Integrated Approach

Smith's ethno-symbolic approach provides a useful overarching approach to locate the emergence of modern Sikh nationalism around the Khalsa *ethnie*, why this identity above all others came to be the differentiator of Sikhs from Hindu society as well as the driver for self-governance, autonomy, and self-determination. Moreover, it is important to recognize the significance of Sikhs as a minority both in the Punjab and the global diaspora, a distinctive minority whose outlook has very much been shaped by the wider world around them. The nation and state-building efforts of the Congress and the Muslim League before 1947 and of India and Pakistan after 1947 have significantly influenced the political character of modern Sikh nationalism, its accommodation to the division of the

Punjab and India on religious lines against the preferred ideal of a religiously plural and multicultural postcolonial Punjab with a substantial Muslim population. Furthermore, it is necessary to read the diaspora and the politics of the Sikhs in the Punjab as mutually dependent. The bias in the existing academic literature and policy analysis of Sikh activism in the West on the relative autonomy of the diaspora as an agent of change in shaping, defining, and determining the nature of modern Sikh nationalism needs to be corrected by a serious analysis of its continued interdependence on the homeland. And finally, the rise of religious nationalism in India and elsewhere since 1979 calls into question the nature of secular nationalism and the secular state in India after 1947, how non-Hindu religious minorities have been politically managed.

The three main narratives of modern Sikh identity noted previously that now shape the community's outlook are deeply braided: they intersect and overlap in complex ways in different contexts. However, this overlap does not mean, as Brass (1974) pointed out, that Sikh nationalism as a socio-logical and political phenomenon is beyond the realms of analysis. Thus, until the Equalities Act (2010) in the United Kingdom, only the Jews and the Sikhs of the country's religious communities were recognized as an "ethnic group" protected under the Race Relations Act (1976). As in the case of the Jews, a reading of modern nationalism among Sikhs is possible if its religious and ethnic roots and character are acknowledged.

As a religious minority within its homeland and the diaspora, the history of the Sikhs offers important areas for comparative reflection.

Socially complex minorities, like the Jews and the Sikhs, which are often defined by religion, are not unamenable to frameworks of ethnicity and nationalism (Smith 1999: 203–224). For such minorities, religion occludes other subjectivities and patterns of behavior. Religion provides Sikh nationalism's *ethnie*, but it is very much a modern nationalism constructed by the conditions of colonial modernity. Sikhism itself has struggled to produce a modern, trans-local community of culture. The melding of religion with the identity of a nation has formed a powerful counterpoint to the idea of India as a secular nation and state; crucially, it also problematizes recent reflections on religious nationalism that view it as a totalizing phenomenon (Friedland 2002).

As a colonial, postcolonial, and indeed, a diaspora minority, the Sikh case also demonstrates how minorities have been influenced and, in turn, shaped the regimes that have managed them. The gradual democratization by the Raj forced the Sikhs to reflect on their position as a once-dominant minority, to negotiate the dilemmas of mass democracy by embracing consociationalism, multiculturalism and ideas of a non-majoritarian postcolonial national government – ideas that were accommodated by plural conceptions of Sikh sovereignty. In the diaspora, the Sikh case also refocuses attention on the contribution of minorities from the Global South in the cultural democratization of the public sphere in Western liberal democracies, including the acceptance of polyethnic rights (Kymlicka 1995; Singh and Tatla 2006). And equally important is the need for more comparative research on how transnational communities like the Sikhs have been able to foster new imaginaries of de-territorialized nationalism.

Furthermore, the Sikhs, like the Baluchis, Kashmiris, Nagas, Tamils (in Sri Lanka) Scots, Catalans, and until recently, the Kurds, are what Guibernau (1999) has called "nations without states." In particular, the Sikh case suggests the need for a more systematic evaluation of how such nations and "nationalism of small peoples" both negotiate the dilemmas of "post sovereignty" while being subject to what Connor (1972) termed "nation-destroying." Since 1947 in India this process has unfolded within the framework of democratic majoritarianism with an assertive nation and state-building in the peripheral regions. The rise of Hindu nationalism, with its symbolic abrogation of Article 370, signals a strategic shift in how some religious minorities are to be managed in the future – a development with profound implications for the post-1947 order.

Finally, the integrated framework applied in *Sikh Nationalism* suggests the need to reflect on the utility of critical theory that has dominated Sikh studies. At best it offers a critique, not a fully developed perspective that can adequately explain the social and political dimensions of Sikh nationalism. It is now time to take the study of Sikh nationalism seriously.

Notes

- 1 An *ethnie* is a French term for an ethnic community. Such a community is “distinguished by both members and outsiders as possessing the attributes of: 1. an identifying name or emblem; 2. a *myth* of common ancestry; 3. shared historical memories and traditions; 4. one or element of a common culture; a link with an historic territory or ‘homeland’; 6 a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites” (Smith 1999, 13).
- 2 By postcolonialism, we refer to any approach that seeks to examine the impact of colonisation in former colonies from the perspective of the colonised. Although influenced by poststructuralism, postcolonialism has a more pronounced normative commitment to decolonisation, see Seth, Gandhi and Dutton (1998, 7–11).
- 3 Globalization is a contested term but refers to how we now live in one world. The argument made by globalisation theorists in the late twentieth century was that advances in information and communication technology and the concomitant deregulation of the global markets had created an embryonic global civil society which transcended the borders of nation-states. For an introduction to the globalization debate, see Held and McGrew (2000).
- 4 To be precise, this is dated from the Iranian revolution in 1979. However, the intensity of this phenomenon coincides with the end of the Cold War (1989) and the onset of globalisation.
- 5 For further discussion of the limits of the gender-centric and feminist critiques of nationalism, see Smith (2003a, 210).
- 6 See fn 7 above for a definition of *ethnie*.
- 7 Historically, the Sikhs, like Ulster Unionists, and Indians and Chinese in Africa and East Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are sometimes referred to as “dominant minorities” who exercised political or economic control because of colonisation or their economic power. Under the Raj, the metaphors of “Ulster” for the Punjab and “Protestant” for Sikhs were regularly used in colonial thinking.

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PART VIII

Diversity and Its Challenges



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DIVERSE GROUPS WITHIN THE SIKH PANTH

Toby Braden Johnson

Introduction

Today, when folks ask, “Who is a Sikh?” most answers rely upon the model of a Khalsa Sikh in the answer. Even with the caveats of *kesdhari* (those who “retain their hair” without taking Khalsa initiation, but still wear the outward symbols of the five *Ks*) and Sikhs who may shave but still hold to the teachings of the ten Gurus, there are others who describe themselves as Sikhs but do not fit so conveniently into this framework. The Singh Sabha reforms and the Tat Khalsa identity that accompanied it seem to have established a standard for Sikh practice and identity. Obviously, not every Sikh is going to look the same, and while outward appearances factor heavily in the presentation of Sikh identity, one cannot overlook the varied ways Sikhs understand their own faith and how they bring that into the world. Differences will arise, no faith community is monolithic or completely homogenous in its beliefs. Variances will occur. Within many communities, a lot of those differences go unnoticed, as they are quite minor. Some stand out as new communities coalesce around people and positions that strike a chord with those varied understandings. Each of the groups to be discussed here complicate and challenge a normative expression of Sikh faith. In general, these groups come together around leaders who bring new interpretations or emphases in their presentation of the Sikh faith. Some have looked to return to the focus of earlier leaders in an effort to stay true to their understanding of what the Gurus set forth as the proper way of a Sikh. Some have sought to emphasize a specific element of Sikh doctrine to make it a central tenet of their understandings. While others have gone a step further to ensure that the message of the Gurus continues by finding a way to extend that lineage and focus on their relationship with a still-living Guru. All of these positions stray from mainstream Sikh understandings that have been the focus of discussions elsewhere in this volume and draw a variety of reactions from the wider community – at times, as will be shown, support, suspicion, and even scorn. This is to be expected. No religious community is spared from this and where such differences arise, so too do arguments about which is the correct way.

This chapter will look at a few of the more significant communities that maintain a presence in the Sikh world today. The discussion will start with one of the most easily identifiable Sikh groups – the well-armed warriors of the Nihangs. The next two groups to be discussed emerged around the same time in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Namdhari and Nirankari communities represent vastly different divergences from the Khalsa model emerging during the Sikh Empire and

early colonial periods. Two movements emerged in the early modern period with the Nanaksar and Akhand Kiratani Jatha emphasizing specific practices that differed from the Singh Sabha vision of the time. Finally, attention will turn to a group that expands the vision of the Panth to include the West, as the 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization), now known as Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, brought Sikh teachings to America under the guise of yoga instruction and created a new vision of the Panth as it strengthened its connection to Sikh teachings. Each of these communities presents a unique view of what it means to be a Sikh and presents itself as the best path for realizing the spiritual goals first set out by Guru Nanak.

The Nihangs

The bright blue garb and well-armed countenance of Nihangs stands out in any survey of Sikh society. Their devotion to the Khalsa ideal is central to their understanding of Sikh life and its goals. The fact that such devotion serves as the driving principle for this group is regarded by many as a somewhat extreme position, as the Nihangs go about life, in many ways, as if they were still fighting the battles of the 1800s, rather than adapting to the more socially engaged, family oriented model of Sikh life. This focus on the militant aspects of the Khalsa are holdovers from their earliest days among the bands of fighters (*misl*s) into which the Khalsa divided in the years following the death of Guru Gobind Singh. It was in that era of fighting that the Nihangs gained their place as a respected, if not zealous, arm of the Panth.

The group that we know as the Nihangs today trace their origins to the Akali misls. The two names by which they are known are both derived from their zealous approach to their faith. With their prayers focused on Akal Purakh, they would repeat the call “Akal, Akal” in their devotional discipline. Thus, the name Akalis was coined. Though some would base this appellation on any one of three stories that stand out to explain the origin of the group’s name as well as their tradition of wearing bright blue outfits and high turbans. By one account, the term Akali (soldiers of the Timeless One) is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. It is said that his young son, Fateh Singh, dressed in one of his father’s bright blue outfits with a high blue turban. The oversize clothes hung loose on the boy, but the Guru claimed that such an outfit was “fit for Akalis.” The Guru’s blue clothes play a significant role in another story that Akalis cite as part of their origin. It is said that Guru Gobind Singh wore a blue outfit as he escaped the Battle of Chamkaur in 1705. Akalis contend that a Sikh saved a piece of this outfit and began to wear a swatch of it in his turban as a sign of devotion and dedication. Others followed suit and soon began to wear completely blue outfits to honor the Guru. The blue outfit and oversize turban motif are furthered by Akalis’ reference to the story of Naina Singh Akali. As the standard bearer of his misl band, Naina Singh Akali found it wise to wear a turban almost as large as the battle flag so that his compatriots could see it during battle, even if the standard fell. This would also allow him to fight with both hands and embolden the spirit of the fighters around him, just as the battle standard would. Each of these stories serves to connect the *bana* (appearance and dress) of the Khalsa with the group’s special emphasis on Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa’s martial prowess. The discipline of the Akalis was not simply rooted in their choice of clothing styles as they embraced the Khalsa ideals of Guru Gobind Singh coming to view themselves and their almost puritanical zeal as the best representation of the Khalsa. Central to their devotion was an emphasis on the martial spirit of Sikh practice over any material connection to the world. The term *nih-ang* refers to this renunciation of worldly concerns and serves as a label for the group that persists today as Nihangs (Judge 2014: 378–380).

The Nihangs’ focus on the traditions of Guru Gobind Singh carry over to his writings as well. They hold the Guru’s *Dasam Granth* in the same regard as *Guru Granth Sahib* and draw inspiration

from its vividly heroic stories. Additionally, Nihangs hold the *Sarab Loh Granth* in equal esteem. The *Sarab Loh Granth* is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and narrates more stories about the conflict between moral gods and evil demons. The drawn-out conflict comes to a head with god taking the incarnate form known as *Sarab Loh* (all-steel) who was able to overwhelm Brijnad, the demon king, with its martial prowess. The purity of steel, its resolve and durability, all serve as analogies for Akal Purakh's righteousness to which the Nihangs' aspire. Their devotion to the all-steel incarnation is demonstrated via the many steel weapons with which they train and adorn themselves, as well as through their insistence on even their cookware and utensils being made of steel.

While the martial elements of Sikh traditions seem magnified through Nihang practice, they are not the sole focus of it. The early Akalis cultivated sought to protect the Panth as a misl group. Under the leadership of Phula Singh Akali (1761–1823), they rose to prominence in the wider view of the Panth's politics. When not leading his misl into battle, Phula Singh Akali's attention focused on *seva* (service) to the Panth. Phula Singh Akali moved his band to Amritsar in 1800 due to his concern for how Sikhs were overseeing their holiest site. Viewed as an example of moral righteousness, he and his Akalis took custody of the Akal Takht to oversee its care and maintenance. He then played a crucial role in negotiating the peaceful transition of power as Maharaja Ranjit Singh took Amritsar in 1802. Ranjit Singh respected Phula Singh Akali's position and made his command of the Akalis official. Despite Ranjit Singh's authority, Akali still ventured to chastise the Maharaja for acts that violated Phula Singh's strict moral code (McLeod 1984: 132).

The Nihangs' continued focus on dedicated service and moral rigor demonstrated through the Khalsa model stands out through Phula Singh Akali's example today. In fact, this author's first encounter with a Nihang occurred at Anandpur Sahib, where an elderly Nihang, dressed in blue with a yellow sash, was doing *seva* within the precincts of the gurdwara. Anandpur remains an important center for the Nihang community. The historical birthplace of the Khalsa now hosts annual Nihang gatherings during *Hola Mohalla* (Sikhs' celebration of Holi) where they put their military skills on display. Nihangs are generally credited with keeping traditional Sikh *gatka* (swordplay) alive. They run many *deras* (camps) around the world devoted to teaching these military traditions to young Sikhs. In this way, the Nihangs have positioned themselves as both the inheritors and protectors of the more militant aspects of the Khalsa lifestyle and make these practices central to their service to the community. As teachers, servants, and guardians of the traditions, the Panth and its holy precincts, the Nihangs, continue to highlight Phula Singh Akali's focus on moral service as essential to their adherence to the Khalsa's principles of protecting the community.

The Namdharis

The Namdharis, literally “one who has the Name [of Akal Purakh imbued in the heart],” represent another approach to maintain the traditions of Guru Gobind Singh (Takhar 2014: 354). Interestingly enough, though, they posit that Guru Gobind Singh was the first to continue his traditions beyond his reported death in 1708. The Namdharis believe that Guru Gobind lived on as a Sikh, named Ajapal Singh, in hiding until finally passing in 1812. Before doing so, he revealed his secret to Balak Singh (1785–1862) and commissioned him to carry on the Khalsa model as the Guru had intended, not as the ensuing years of the misls and the Maharaja had led it to become. The Namdharis were a reform movement of sorts, trying to restore the community that Guru Gobind Singh led, but now with Balak Singh serving as the Guru at the head of this renewed Khalsa. It is their insistence that the line of human Gurus continues that sets the Namdharis apart from the more general traditions of the Sikh Panth and its acceptance of the *Guru Granth Sahib* as authoritative. Developing a tradition that mixes older Sikh practices with the leadership of a living Guru,

the Namdharis represent a unique view of what it means to be a Sikh by emphasizing a life of purity and devotion.

The Namdhari founder, Balak Singh, was concerned with keeping to the devotional practices set out by the Gurus themselves. He focused on the three common threads of Sikh belief – *nam* (devotion to Akal Purakh), *dan* (charity), and *ishnan* (purity) – relying on meditation, service, and three daily baths and a strict vegetarian diet to demonstrate it. Namdhari meditation is known to lead some to a state of ecstatic “intoxication,” which stirred them to release loud cries or shrieks of devotion (*kuk*) that led many to refer to the early Namdharis as “Kuka Sikhs.” Balak Singh valued honesty in one’s labor, speech, and service even going so far as to require a monthly tithe. Namdharis stand out in their all-white garb and turbans, an easily visible sign of their focus on purity. They also wear a *mala*, a rosary woven of white cord and tied with 108 knots. The fact that both the men and women would wear this attire to express the Five K’s of Khalsa practice stood out as well from mainstream Sikh practice of the nineteenth century. The focus on purity carried over to their diet as well, as the Namdharis were strict vegetarians who prohibited the use of alcohol as well. Doctrinally, the Namdharis respect the writings of the Gurus, and they venerate both the *Adi Granth* and the *Dasam Granth*. Selections from both texts are included in their *nitnem* (daily prayer regimen). In a Namdhari gurdwara, the *Adi Granth* is placed next to the Guru’s *palki* (palanquin or dais) as they do not accept the idea of *Guru Granth* alongside their living Guru. This rejection of *Guru Granth* plays out in a few other areas of Namdhari practice – most notably in the wedding ceremonies and their rejection of the SGPC’s authority over their gurdwaras and the community in general. Namdhari weddings do not take place around the *Adi Granth*, they are centered around a fire as Sikh weddings were in the days of the earliest Sikh Gurus. The presence of a living Guru, known as *Satguru*, who leads the community also serves to make the SGPC’s involvement in running their gurdwaras and setting policy unnecessary (McLeod 1984: 126–131).

One aspect of Namdhari practice that stands out over the last century and a half is their focus on pacifism. This shines through in their vegetarian diet but can also be seen in the fact that Namdharis do not wear the *kirpan* associated with traditional Khalsa practice. This was not always the case. The Namdhari movement grew under the leadership of Balak Singh’s successor, Ram Singh (1816–1885), who had joined after serving in the first Anglo-Sikh War (1845–1846). It was Ram Singh who formalized the Namdhari code of conduct and issued it as a *hukamnama* (effectively, the Guru’s order) to be spread throughout the Punjab by a newly established system of Namdhari missionaries. Among the commands issued was a rejection of the idolatrous practices of local Hindus and some Sikhs. The Namdharis were a bit zealous about this idea and took to destroying the idols and tombs, drawing the ire of locals and British colonial authorities. In 1863, the British banned Namdhari gatherings. This did not stop their desire to protect the cows as part of their mission, and they took to strike out at butchers, killing some and with eight Namdharis sentenced to death for the murders. This spurred the Namdharis to further resist British rule. In 1872, Namdharis moved to secure more weapons to strike against colonial authorities. Initially, 49 Namdharis, who had killed 10 and injured 17 more in the weapons raid, were put to death, strapped to the front of cannons that were then fired. Another 16 Namdharis were executed by the British in the same manner shortly thereafter as the British cracked down on Namdharis. The Namdharis viewed those killed by the British as martyrs. Ram Singh was arrested and exiled to Rangoon, Burma. While there, Ram Singh nominated his younger brother, Buddh Singh (1819–1906), to be his successor. Buddh Singh was renamed Hari Singh and continued the Namdhari cause by resisting British policies through boycotts and noncooperation. Ram Singh died in prison, and Hari Singh moved the Namdharis away from violent reprisal and militancy and to embrace the pacifism of their diet in all aspects of their lives.

Namdharis were led through the twentieth century by both Pratap Singh (1890–1959) and Jagjit Singh (1920–2012). Their peaceful focus garnered wider support in the Punjab as they moved to more social outreach, making their central encampment at Sri Bhaini Sahib in Ludhiana a center of learning and piety. The Namdharis were recognized and honored for their struggles against the British and their peaceful model of non-cooperation. They are also praised for their history of including women in their piety and rejecting the misogyny of many traditional practices. The Namdharis did not allow dowries and would hold multiple weddings at once to ensure none were exchanged. These practices continue today under the leadership of Satguru Uday Singh (1958–). The Namdharis have entered the digital age with their global outreach coordinated through their website, *Sri Bhaini Sahib* (sribhainisahib.com). The website highlights the Namdharis' commitment to social reform and lists the emancipation of women as first among those achievements alongside fighting drug and alcohol abuse, gurnat based marriage, and a pursuit of a debt-free society. It is not difficult to see how the Namdharis see these goals as consistent with the Sikh message and a continuation of Khalsa teachings by continuing the lineage of living Gurus (Takhar 2014: 254–355).

The Nirankaris

The Nirankaris' approach to renewing Sikh practices did not lie with the Khalsa but by advocating a return to the earliest teachings of Guru Nanak. Baba Dayal (1783–1855) was not a Khalsa Sikh and was offended by the mixing of many Hindu practices with Sikh ones, such as *murtis* in gurdwaras or Sikhs' reliance on sacred fires in a wedding ceremony. Baba Dayal sought to renew the spirit of the Sikh message by Guru Nanak's concept of the Formless One (*nirankar*) and eschewing both idol worship and the use of outward symbols as a demonstration of faith. He focused on the inner dimensions of Sikh practice and emphasized *nam simran* (meditating on the Divine Name) as the key to finding liberation through divine grace – not the trappings of the Khalsa's "Five Ks."

Baba Dayal began preaching his vision of simple living in accordance with the Gurus in Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan) shortly after moving there in 1802. The grocer-turned-preacher taught in local gurdwaras and was critical of the use of images and the use of traditionally Hindu symbols and rites as Sikh practices, drawing on Guru Nanak's own rejection of these ideas as pointless. A significant break from these practices came in 1808, at Baba Dayal's wedding. Instead of having the wedding take place around the customary sacred fire and having a Brahman officiate, Baba Dayal sought to place the Guru at the center of the ceremony. Rather than walking around a sacred fire, he and his betrothed stood before the *Guru Granth Sahib* while a *giani* (Sikh prayer leader) read the *Lavan* and *Anand* hymns, by Gurus Ram Das and Amar Das, respectively. Eventually, Baba Dayal's critiques were seen as too disruptive and he was effectively kicked out of the gurdwara in Rawalpindi, so he bought a plot and started the Nirankari Darbar there in 1851, giving him a place that he and his followers could call their own.

Baba Dayal's eldest son and successor, Darbara Singh (1814–1870), continued to emphasize the message on keeping Sikh traditions free from the corrupting distractions. He established a number of other Nirankari centers beyond Rawalpindi. In 1856, Darbara Singh authored a hukamnama that outlined Nirankari beliefs and practices in which he emphasized the focus on Akal Purakh's formless nature and shunned Brahmanical practices still present in Sikh life. It was a call to bring the Panth back to the path of the Gurus from which it had strayed. A year earlier he had added the four circumambulations of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in a public wedding in 1855 to further emphasize the centrality of the Gurus' message in married life. In April 1861, he led a public wedding in this manner in the precincts of Amritsar. This style of Sikh wedding caught on with the wider Sikh Panth. The ceremony has come to be known as an "*Anand* marriage" and is now practiced by Sikhs

around the world, thus validating the significance of Baba Dayal's focus on keeping the Gurus at the center of one's devotions (McLeod 1984: 121–126).

While the Sikh Panth adopted the Nirankari marriage practices, the group's insistence that Baba Dayal and Darabara Singh were living Gurus, carrying on the traditions of the previous ten, were a barrier to wider acceptance. The Nirankaris' Satgurus, sharing the same title used by the Namdharis extended lineage, continued to establish centers beyond Rawalpindi into the early twentieth century. Nirankaris continued to push for Sikhs to distance themselves from Hindu practices and to be recognized as a separate community by British colonial administration. In this way, the Nirankaris worked in step with the Singh Sabha reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Satguru Sahib Rattaji (1870–1909) was instrumental in working to pass the "Anand Marriage Act" of 1909, which recognized Sikh marriages as valid and separate from Hindu traditions. This was but a moment of cooperation between the Nirankaris and the Singh Sabha reformers as the latter were key to instill a Khalsa-centered vision of Sikhism and the Nirankaris continued to reject that mode of life, preferring to align themselves with the Gurus' lived example. The Nirankaris set the example for Sikhs to put the Gurus' words, as recorded in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, at the center of their lives, their rites, and their gurdwaras. During Partition, they moved their *darbar* to Chandigarh and continued their preaching and outreach from there. Today the Nirankaris are led by Baba Gurbax Singh and are still promoting a model of Sikhism independent of the Khalsa ideal.

The Nanaksar Group

The Nanaksar movement not only emphasizes devotion to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, but they also make it the central focus of their practices. Baba Nand Singh (c.1869–1943), the founder of the movement, sought to ensure that the *Guru Granth Sahib* was treated in the same way as the living Gurus would have been. Baba Nand Singh taught humble devotion to the Guru, going so far as to sit in a pit in the ground to ensure that the *Guru Granth Sahib* was higher than him. He and his successor, Baba Ishar Singh (1916–1963), established gurdwaras in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Nanaksar gurdwaras do not fly the Khalsa flag or have an attached kitchen as the *langar* is typically prepared by members at home and brought to the gurdwara. The leaders of these gurdwaras could be characterized as ascetic as they promote their vegetarian lifestyle and celibacy, while devoting themselves to service via their care for the premises and the copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* it houses. One Nanaksar practice that stands out is their monthly worship on the night of the full moon, a night that involves music and kirtan and culminates with the *arati* hymn sung as devotees spread flowers and spray fragrances around to create an experience that engages the senses. The Nanaksar movement splintered after the passing of Baba Ishar Singh, with three *Babajis* claiming to be the rightful successor and leading their respective congregations today.

Akhand Kiratani Jatha

Bhai Randhir Singh (1878–1961) combined the practices of a religious mystic with political activism and rooted it all in his understanding of the Sikh Khalsa. Though he served in a variety of government jobs, he joined protests against the British in 1913, when Gurdwara Raqab Ganj's wall was destroyed in order to construct a palace for the Viceroy. He cooperated with Ghadr revolutionaries in 1915 and was arrested and jailed in Lahore for conspiring against the government. He spent the next 15 years in jail. During that time, he turned to meditation and kirtan. Upon his release, he began preaching with an emphasis on piety, courage, and sacrifice. He was a prolific author, writing more than 35 books on theology, mysticism, and Sikh philosophy. His followers joined him for

services that involved rapid repetition of “Vahiguru” as a devotional technique alongside long, uninterrupted communal singing known as *akhand kirtan*, from which the group derives its name. They believe that the Gurus’ hukamnamas require a Sikh to be a vegetarian. While he considered himself a Khalsa Sikh, he did not believe that uncut hair was part of the code of conduct, but the turban was as they insist that the *keski* (turban) was one of the Five Ks, not the *kesh* (uncut hair) for both men and women. Members of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha promote their Khalsa identity but do not see it as a monolithic expression of Sikh identity as they recognize the diverse interpretations being Khalsa present from its earliest days. They simply see themselves as ones who have come together on a path towards their realization of Vahiguru via the meditative discipline set out by Bhai Randhir Singh and “an inseparable part of the Khalsa Panth” (Akand Keerthanee Jatha 2021).

Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO)/The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere

The counterculture movement of 1960s Los Angeles provided the right environment for Harbhajan Singh Puri (1929–2004) to build a community with mostly white middle-class Americans that combined healthy living with Kundalini yoga (aligning the energy of the body’s *chakras*). For those interested in adopting ancient wisdom of India and meditative practices, Yogi Bhajan, as he was affectionately known, offered a unique opportunity to study with an “authentic” Indian Guru at the East-West Cultural Center. He billed his teachings of Kundalini as “The Yoga of Awareness” and started an ashram that taught people to follow “healthy, happy, holy lives” (3HO 2021). In 1969, Yogi Bhajan formally created the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) and registered it as a tax-exempt educational organization and began sending student teachers throughout North America to establish more 3HO ashrams. These ashrams taught an ascetic lifestyle based in kundalini yoga where both men and women would wear white clothes and turbans and take new “Indian” names.

While the public face of 3HO was all about yoga, Yogi Bhajan slowly introduced Sikh teachings to his closest students. In 1971, he took a group of 3HO members to Delhi and Amritsar to teach them Sikh roots of his message. Bhajan’s group was welcomed by the Akal Takht, and he was commended for his missionary work. Yogi Bhajan took this to heart and saw himself as the one chosen to bring Sikhism to the West. He adopted the new appellation “Siri Singh Sahib” for himself, casting his role as the “Chief Administrative and Religious Authority for the Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere” in order to fulfil his new mandate. He revealed the basis of the “healthy, happy, holy” life was orthodox Sikhism, based in the practices of the Khalsa. Not all 3HO members accepted the switch in focus, but a substantial number did and two years later, he established the “Sikh Dharma Brotherhood” as a religious organization recognized by the United States government. The group would later become the “Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere” as they dropped the gendered connotation for a more inclusive approach to their vision for sharing Sikhism.

As Sikhs in the West, they took initiation into the Khalsa and pledged themselves to the *Rehat Maryada* (Khalsa code of conduct) with a few key exceptions. Their gurdwaras are run by ministers, where devotion to the *Guru Granth Sahib* goes together with *nam simran* meditations and the kundalini yoga. Services would include hymns and music performed primarily in English, but some in Punjabi. They continued to dress in all-white clothing, earning them the name *gora* (white) Sikhs, and focused on an egalitarian message that uplifts both men and women and are critical of such holdovers in Punjabi Sikh practices. This is further demonstrated by Sikh Dharma members taking the surname Khalsa, rather than taking on Singh or Kaur upon Khalsa initiation as most do. Altogether, this became the Sikh Dharma’s vision for Sikh belief and practice in their gurdwaras.

The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere did not see its mission limited to North America and has made strides to engage the wider Sikh Panth in the Punjab and worldwide through their teaching, business, and digital endeavors. In 1996 they began construction on the Miri Piri Academy in Amritsar. The school opened the next year with lessons focusing on “a Dharmic lifestyle, the technology of Kundalini Yoga,” and academics (Miri Piri Academy 2021). The school has been recognized for its musical programs focused on kirtan, gaining popularity among both Gora and Punjabi Sikhs. Their musicians have even performed within Harimandir Sahib (the Golden Temple). Sikh Dharma created business opportunities via their for-profit ventures: health food and tea distributor, Khalsa International Industries and Trade (KIIT) and private security firm, Akal Security. Sikh Dharma is also behind one of the premiere Internet destinations for information about Sikhism, *SikhNet | Sharing the Sikh Experience*. The site is a repository of Sikh history, liturgical texts, and news from a Khalsa-centered viewpoint while servicing audiences around the world, despite the unique interpretation of the Khalsa ideal held by the group.

In a few keyways, the Sikh Dharma represents a view of Sikhism taking its first steps away from its Punjabi roots but rooted in Indian identity in ways that reach beyond Sikhism. They are taking new steps with outreach to non-Punjabis via their use of liturgies and songs in English. They have made the Khalsa ideal both understandable and accessible to people interested in the faith, but without the barrier of learning a new language first. For these reasons, many orthodox Sikhs praise their efforts. Conversely, though the continued emphasis on kundalini yoga and that same use of English liturgy is seen by many orthodox Sikhs as a dilution of Sikh practice. Despite these apparently contradictory positions, the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere contends that they are the exemplars of orthodox practice in the new context of modern America and reaching out to new converts in ways that diaspora Sikhs will not and cannot.

Making Sense of this Diversity

No religious community is homogenous. There are always variations, differing interpretations, certain emphases and/or connections that matter more to some than others. Each of these groups represent a unique perspective on what it means to be a Sikh. Their identity is rooted in a specific understanding of their relation to the Gurus’ message and what that entails for them. They claim allegiance to the Gurus in their own ways and demonstrate their faith in the way they see fit. They may not conform to the model of Sikhism that was normalized through the Singh Sabha reforms of the early twentieth century, nor adhere to the *Rehat Maryada* as the SGPC advises. Nor do they feel that they would need to do so. The Nihangs find direction in their devotion to the all-steel doctrines of *Sarab Loh*. The Namdharis look to their Satguru for continued guidance to keep their vision of the Khalsa alive. The Nirankaris find inspiration in the earliest days of the Sikh community and keep that model going with their Satguru. The Nanaksar continue to honor the *Guru Granth Sahib* with their ascetic practices. The Akhand Kiratani Jatha have created new modes for Sikh expression in their worship practices. The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere has made the Sikh message available to people around the world in ways that Sikhs have not seen before. If being Sikh means follow the Gurus, these groups are definitely Sikh. They have found a community with like-minded Sikhs to pursue their faith together while doing so. These groups are legacies of the Panth’s diversity as well as part of its future.

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CASTE GROUPS

The Lived Experience of *Zat* (Caste) Amongst Sikhs

Opinderjit Kaur Takhar

Introduction

The position and role of caste (*zat*) amongst Sikhs is a contentious and often sensitive issue, which in most cases always raises a heated debate (see Takhar 2005; Jodhka 2014). There is an abundance of published literature on the topic of caste and its demonization that represents caste as a discriminatory factor on a practical level (Gupta 2005; Srinivas 1996). Caste, or *zat* as it is referred to in the Panjabi context, remains the oldest of challenges in contemporary India and “continues to affect its economy and polity even today” (Ram 2013: 2). Importantly however, we must explore another angle of caste/*zat* in that it is part of a long-standing cultural norm that is integral to the Indian mindset, and this includes the Sikh mindset too. In some respects, therefore, contrary to the insidious perspective one finds in much academic literature, caste is also viewed as positive when discussing how a Sikh self-identifies in keeping with an overarching religious and cultural system (see Ballard 1999). Preserving and protecting heritage may well be a factor for individuals who may not want to speak up against it (Takhar 2017). The basic identity of individuals in the Indian subcontinent is constituted around caste Teltumbde (2012). Repeatedly, Guru Nanak’s emphasis on “Oneness” teaches that the essence of the Divine is imminent in the hearts of all human beings, this in turn entails that all human beings are equal and therefore negates any form of prejudice and discrimination towards others. Sikhi (the teachings of the Sikh faith) is abundant with references to gender and caste equality. Thus, Guru Nanak rejected the discrimination towards the lower castes and women, which had been so vehemently expressed through *Manusmriti* (the religious law books which sanctioned such prejudice towards women and the lower castes).

It is the principle of equal rights and spiritual opportunities for each human being that makes Guru Nanak’s philosophy revolutionary, solitary, and unique in its all-encompassing outlook. His was an egalitarian approach to everyday living, which was carried on by the succeeding Gurus through several institutions such as the establishment of the *langar* and the creation of the Khalsa in 1699 CE. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the term “egalitarian” is defined as “*relating to (person) holding, the principle of equal rights etc. for all persons.*” A further example of the practical element of egalitarianism through Sikhi is clearly expressed through the inclusion of the Bhagat Bani in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The uniqueness of Guru Nanak’s approach in tackling caste distinctions went beyond just the spiritual domain, as was the case about the anti-caste attitudes of the Bhagats.

For the *Bhagats*, their teachings related more so to equal access to the afterlife for all castes, whereas Guru Nanak openly mingled with the lower castes and promoted the ideals of the *langar* system. All of this is a rejection of caste distinctions on the practical, as well as spiritual level too. Guru Nanak, and the succeeding Gurus, therefore placed emphasis on the “this worldliness” of the lived aspect of their teachings.

The adoption of Sikhi by the lower classes was particularly pronounced around the events of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru. His severed head was brought back to his son, who became the tenth Sikh Guru, by Bhai Jaita, labelled as “lower caste” due to his Dalit background. This event witnessed a turning point in the adoption of the Sikh way of life by the so-called lower castes as an aspirational move towards equality. The extent to which this was achieved remains a debated issue amongst Sikhs and those who increasingly identify as Ravidassia, Valmiki, or Ambedkarite (see Takhar 2017). Interestingly, in the Census of England Wales 2011, 11,000 respondents recorded their “religion” as Ravidassia. It is highly likely that the majority of these 11,000 respondents would have recorded their “religion” as Sikh in the previous census. My research has alluded to the fact that these numbers are largely tied in with discrimination faced by Dalits from higher caste Sikhs (see Takhar 2014). Conversely, there is also an argument that identifying as Ravidassia and explicitly as non-Sikh is about political identity, rather than one that revolves around faith/religious identity (see Ram 2008). Regardless of various arguments, caste plays a role and has presence amongst Sikhs as a global Panth (collective Sikh community).

Sikhi, Sikhs, and Caste

Sikhi, a term which refers to the teachings of the Sikh faith, repeatedly denounce prejudice and discrimination based around *zat* (caste). The emphasis and uniqueness of Guru Nanak’s concept of Oneness naturally translates into the equality of all human beings on both a spiritual as well as practical, everyday level. This is where his approach was markedly different from those of the *Bhagats* who had succeeded him. For the *Bhagats*, their teachings related more so to equality in the afterlife, rather than the emphasis on the “this worldliness” nature of the Gurus’ *bani*. Bhagat Ravidass for example (referred to as Guru Ravidass by his followers) uses the utopian concept of *Beghampura* “the land without sorrow” in the afterlife, where all are equal. The teachings of Bhagat Ravidass are present in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (for further details see Takhar 2014).

The degree however, to which the principle of egalitarianism is adhered to by Sikhs through the lived experience is where criticism based on the hypocrisy between teachings and practice stems from. Before exploring the lived experience that *zat* plays amongst Sikhs, it is important to highlight the Sikhi perspective on this controversial and often sensitive topic of caste amongst Sikhs to understand the interplay between belief, Panjabi culture, and ethnicity.

Guru Nanak’s aspirations towards accepting all fellow human beings as equal finds expression throughout the *Guru Granth Sahib*. This was a radical change in the fifteenth century in evaluating one’s attitude towards especially the vulnerable groups in society. Through his *bani* (utterances/teachings), as well as those of the succeeding Gurus, caste, and gender parity entails the ultimate recognition of the Divine light, *jot*, in all human beings. Guru Nanak teaches,

Amongst all there is the Divine light
Through this light, all become enlightened by the *jot*.
Through the Guru, the Divine light becomes manifest.

(GGS: 13)

He further emphasizes that

Recognise the *jot* within all and inquire not the caste, as there is no caste in the next world.
(GGS: 349)

The practical application of the teachings around denouncing caste-based discrimination were expressed through the practice of the *langar* wherever Sikhs, and other followers of the Gurus, would assemble. Furthermore, the institution of the *langar* in all gurdwaras promotes the important notion of commensality, to eat with those from outside one's caste in refuting the notion of ritual pollution, particularly from those traditionally labelled as "lower castes." The distribution of *karah prasad* in the gurdwara and at all Sikh-orientated gatherings and events illustrates the Sikh's acceptance of all, regardless of caste, faith/religion/belief or social background. The fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan, purposely designed Harmandir Sahib to have four doors of entry, signifying that it was open to all individuals: hence further strengthening the egalitarian outlook of Sikhi. Despite these practical measures, however, caste and caste discrimination continue to have a presence in the psyche and behavior of Sikhs.

Although on a spiritual level, the *bani* of Guru Nanak and that of the succeeding Gurus is very much against the notion of ritual purity and conversely ritual pollution through one's birth, the eradication of the caste system, *per se*, is open to many interpretations and scholarly opinions. Banerjee considers that the "complete elimination of a system which had been the basis of Hindu social organization for many centuries was extremely difficult, if not impossible; but orthodoxy could hardly resist a breach in the citadel" (1978: 83). Talib highlights that Guru Nanak's emphasis was most certainly on the practical application of his vision towards an egalitarian society:

He [Guru Nanak] denounced the injustice and inhumanity of caste which had given divine sanction to the degradation and humiliation irretrievably of vast sections of mankind; and which furthermore conferred the status of sanctity and superiority on others through a sheer accident of birth.

(1969: 67)

The horizontal dimension of the Gurus' teachings about caste is clear: those who are followers of the Gurus should not practice caste discrimination. However, it is not entirely self-evident that the Gurus' social comment on caste was intended to completely eradicate a system that identified individuals with an in-group. For example, all ten Gurus were from the Khatri *zat*, their offspring were also married in accordance with rules around endogamy to Khatri. Therefore, caste *per se* was a social order that the Gurus themselves accepted through their own marriages and those of their offspring. Endogamy is also important to youngsters from the Panjabi Dalit community, as highlighted in the following testimony from an interview conducted by the author:

It is a personal wish, but best to stick to tradition and marry someone within your caste, because then no one will say you're from a certain caste etc. It's a decision you should think not for yourself but family members too, and their honour. However, you take that decision to think about your future, and what life would be like after you are married.

(Raj, Chamar, Ravidassia)

Therefore, the importance of maintaining family honor, *izzat*, is strongly attached to how caste identities manifest themselves in contemporary British society amongst South Asians (Ballard 1994; Takhar 2005). The cultural and ethnicity aspects of caste amongst some Sikhs, particularly when it

comes to marriage, are a contentious and sensitive issue. Discussing caste amongst Sikhs is a complex issue that has arisen from attempts to try and simplify the structure of Indian society which in turn has added confusion in subsequent understandings of how caste works on the ground. Sikhs are indeed divided over caste. Some view endogamies as essential in maintaining the family's *izzat*, whereas others translate Sikh teachings as totally rejecting caste identities:

I have been to many [Gurdwaras] where I have felt excluded or belittled. I have had people look down on me and ask me my surname.

(Jyoti, Dalit, Ravidassia)

Alarming, despite the emphasis on eradicating caste-based discrimination, the influx of the lower castes (particularly chuhars and chamars) into the Panth became collectively labelled as the *Rangretia* and *Mazhabi* Sikhs, a title that denoted their low-caste status despite many having taken initiation into the apparently casteless fold of the Khalsa. It is not clear as to where the latter term originated from, although it is translated as “those with a *mazhab*” (faith/religion). Does this mean the rest of the Panth is without a *mazhab*?

The “caste-identifying” labelling has continued into the present era with labels such as Dalit Sikhs (the word Dalit is translated as “oppressed/crushed” because of caste hierarchy), Ravidassia Sikhs, and Valmiki Sikhs. Other castes too openly refer to themselves as Jat Sikhs, Ramgharia Sikhs, Saini Sikhs, and so on. The blatant fact that gurdwaras have, and continue to be, established around caste identities is the subject of a well-documented paper by Kiyotaka Sato in his research on gurdwaras in the United Kingdom (see Sato 2012). Sikh youngsters who self-identify as Dalit and or Ravidassia Sikhs regularly make the point that their ancestors set up caste based gurdwaras in the 1960s and 1970s because of the discrimination that they faced in “mainstream” gurdwaras, which tended to be dominated by non-Dalit Sikhs. In recent years, places of worship of the Ravidassia and Valmiki communities increasingly prefer to be recognized as Sabhas and Bhawans, rather than as “gurdwaras.” This has led to a strengthening of their religious identity as non-Sikhs (see Takhar 2011). However, caste-based institutions amongst the British Sikh community are not solely based on assertions of a distinct religious identity; rather, the large numbers of Ramgharia and Bhatra Gurdwaras are established by caste groups who also identify with the “mainstream” Sikh community (Singh Gurharpal 2012).

Where does this leave the discussion around whether the Panth is a caste-less collective? When questioned by the author about whether an interviewee has a preference for the gurdwara they attend, the response was that they prefer to attend the

Shri Guru Ravidass Temple, Walsall and Birmingham. We attend these Gurdwaras only because if you go to other Gurdwaras they discriminate you saying you're from a different caste: Chamar coming here, having free Langar, and you listen to the Bani but you have no turban or beard.

(Raj, Chamar, Ravidassia)

Respondents to the research that I have carried out have often remarked that gurdwaras (many of which are caste-based) should work closely together to eradicate the issue of caste prejudice and discrimination amongst Sikhs.

The majority of surnames used amongst Sikhs are caste-based, which can render caste identities identifiable on the basis of one's surname (see Sharma 2012). The Tat Khalsa ideal was to discontinue the use of caste names in favor of Singh and Kaur, which was viewed as a means of putting

an end to caste-based prejudice among Sikhs. However, there is evidence that caste remains a phenomenologically important identity among many Sikhs and that, despite theological attempts to distance Sikhi from the institution of caste, many Sikhs continue to view this as an important cultural component of identity. Caste identity continues to play a role in individuals' decision-making and judgements about others' social status, character, and competence, and caste-based stereotypes are often salient, even among those individuals who deny attributing importance to caste (Jaspal 2011). The practice of caste based divisions amongst the Sikhs is markedly different to the practice of caste amongst other South Asian communities, as highlighted by Jodhka: "Sikh caste differs from its more classical antecedents. . . . Nor is there any specific caste group comparable to the kind of division that the textbook view of caste suggests" (2014: 583). The primary data I have collected over the past two decades points towards case studies in which those Sikhs who traditionally belong to one of the "lower castes" have faced discrimination from other Sikhs because of the stigma of untouchability. To the extent that, growing numbers of individuals from these "lower" castes no longer wish to be identified as Sikhs but as "Ravidassia" or "Valmiki." The Ravidassias, also referred to as Ravidasi, acknowledge allegiance to Ravidass as their Guru (see Takhar 2005: Chapter 4). There are 41 hymns of Ravidass, referred to as Bhagat by Sikhs at large, in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. His followers, like himself, are exclusively from the *chuhra* *zat* of Dalits. The Valmiki is from the *chuhra* *zat* of Dalits and claim that this was also the caste of Valmiki, the author of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana (see Takhar 2005: Chapter 5). These identities are far from being rigid, however, as the results of the 2011 UK Census highlighted (Takhar 2011, 2014). Furthermore, a number of Ravidassia places of worship across the world have replaced the *Guru Granth Sahib* with Amritbani Guru Ravidass in efforts to abandon their identification as Sikhs (see Takhar 2014). Therefore, the decision between either the retention or the removal of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in Ravidassia places of worship has huge implications on the issue of religious identity.

Several writers have indicated that caste is the principal institution that governs social and personal relationships in the Subcontinent (Dumont 1988; Gupta 2004). Due to its long-standing cultural and religious significance in various spheres of life in the Subcontinent, caste remains significant for many people across a multitude of social domains (Judge and Bal 2008). Caste prejudice and discrimination in the Indian context have persisted despite the many reform movements that have spoken out against its discriminatory element and the anti-caste legislation that has been promulgated in India (Takhar 2005; Kalsi 1989). Moreover, the founding principles of the Sikh faith concerned the rejection of caste-based notions of superiority and inferiority of individuals. This is of course partly maintained by the historical significance of caste, the cultural and spatial reflections of caste, and the construction of other religious and political identities on the basis of caste identities (e.g., the emergence of Ravidassia, Valmiki, Ad Dharm identities) (Takhar 2014; Kalsi 1989), given that these "new" identities also serve to reify and perpetuate the caste system, albeit in indirect ways (see Ram 2008; Takhar 2011). According to Ghuman (2015), non-Dalit Indians in the UK fail to acknowledge that casteism exists in Britain. Indeed, this is an observation that I too have made during various conversations with British Sikhs, especially the younger generation. Gurharpal Singh's (2012) observation that Sikhs in Britain are differentiated on the basis of their caste as also observations by Roger Ballard (1989, 1994) has also highlighted, through extensive fieldwork, that caste identities are indeed important to South Asians, whether living in the Indian Subcontinent or elsewhere.

Bhangra lyrics remain influential in strengthening *Jat* caste identification with the land in Panjab/India, even though *Jats* living in India too are becoming urbanized (Kalra 2000). The *Jats'* nostalgic relationship with the Panjab and the ancestral village (*pind*) continues to infiltrate the younger generation through the sustained popularity of bhangra amongst British Panjabi youth. This is a

means of positive identification with the ingroup and one that strengthens caste identity as being autochthonous, especially for Jat Sikh youth. Nicola Mooney observes that

Jats reclaim their identities through the construction and assertion of a rural imaginary, a symbolic and discursive project in which urban and diasporic Jats variously create, deploy, and commemorate a romanticized rural identity as a means of negotiating the impacts of development, modernity, and transnationalism.

(2011: 174)

The popularity of bhangra amongst British Sikh youth can thus be seen to contribute to positive aspects of being associated with the caste ingroup, and it would be misleading to suggest that such lyrics simply intend to subordinate outgroups, as has been remarked by a number of activists in recent years.

In order to make sense of what role, if any, caste plays amongst Sikhs, Jaspal and Takhar (2016) explored the reactions of British Sikh youngsters to questions about identity in relation to one's caste or ingroup. Although generally, there is an implicit representation of caste as a negative aspect of South Asian culture and religion, and of caste identification as a means of oppressing vulnerable outgroups, the study taps into the social representations held by young British Sikhs. Jaspal and Takhar (2016) further indicate that identifying with a caste does not necessarily become synonymous with notions of hierarchy and subordination. Using identity process theory in their data analysis has indicated that people monitor their identity in relation to their environment and how they sense control of this environment. What the research shows is that endogamy enforces group membership. Because caste is an important *symbolic* aspect of identity, some Sikhs wish to maintain this identity through endogamy (Takhar 2005).

Generally, Sikhs are concerned about their children marrying into their own ethnicity and religion (as also highlighted by respondents above). Caste also works well in this case for them by reinforcing a sense of continuity and group. Despite the emphasis on the irrelevance of caste-based distinctions in *Sikhi*, it would be naïve to deny that caste based discrimination takes place amongst the British Sikh community. Jaspal and Takhar have indicated that

there is evidence that caste remains a phenomenologically important identity among many Sikhs and that, despite theological attempts to distance Sikhism from the institution of caste, many Sikhs continue to view this as an important cultural component of identity.

(2016: 1)

Caste Legislation in British Law

The proposed changes to British legislation to make caste discrimination illegal in the United Kingdom has caused much unrest amongst the Hindu, Sikh, and Dalit communities in Britain. On April 23, 2013, British Parliament agreed an Amendment on caste to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill (ERR Bill). The Bill received Royal Assent on April 25, 2013, and Section 97 of the ERR Act (that provides that Government “shall” use Section 9(5)a to make caste an aspect of race) came into force on June 25, 2013. The Amendment will be made to the Equality Act 2010 by “adding caste as ‘an aspect of’ the protected characteristic of race” (Waughray 2014). Most British Sikhs agreed that legislation against caste discrimination was unnecessary under British law. The Sikh Council UK (SCUK) declared that “caste allegiances were on their way out in the UK” and demanded a Sunset Clause that essentially renders the caste legislation as temporary for a period of

ten years since the credence of the SCUK is that caste will have absolutely no significance for subsequent generations of British Sikhs. Importantly, although the government's timetable stated that the legislation would not be enforced before October 2015, the considerable delay in implementation led to opposition from both Sikh and Hindu organizations.

The overall response of the British Sikh community is that the legislation is unnecessary and that any problems associated with caste should be addressed through education. The "Talk for Change" program was subsequently funded by British government in an attempt to find community-based solutions to caste related prejudice and discrimination. The author's personal conversations with individuals from both the Sikh and Dalit communities suggests that the educational program failed to reach any conclusive objectives. Furthermore, the legislation does not cover religious institutions; currently the legislation covers caste-based discrimination in the workplace, public services (for example cases of neglect of elderly Dalit patients in care homes or those receiving care in their own homes), and educational institutions.

According to the British Sikh Report 2013, 61.2% of the 662 British Sikhs who responded to the survey indicated that they have no concern for caste-related issues. This has also been voiced by the Sikh Council UK in their insistence on a Sunset Clause. The Sikh community also raised concerns that references in the framework to lobby for legislation to the Sikh faith should be removed, as the Sikh faith is fundamentally based on egalitarian principles that reject caste and gender discrimination (Singh Pashaura 2000). The Sikh Council UK's opposition to the legislation is summarized in their following statement:

In essence our position is that identities based upon essentially historical family professions are becoming increasingly irrelevant due to mobility, increased opportunities and socio-economic convergence. Therefore, we would be opposed to any measures that potentially entrench these labels in UK society. We should not make the same mistake as Indian legislators who through well-intentioned but poorly thought through legislation have had the unintended consequence of the varna system entrenchment and increased polarisation of society on a scale that is now probably irreversible.

(Personal communication, July 2015)

Anti-legislation organizations, primarily the Sikh Council UK and the Alliance of Hindu Organisations, have adamantly expressed the opinion that a 2010 report on caste in Britain (Metcalf and Rolfe 2010), commissioned by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), is flawed in its methodology. The Sikh Council UK takes the view that a comprehensive study should have used the evidence provided by case studies to demonstrate how attitudes and discrimination associated with caste have changed over time, especially with the younger generation of Sikhs. Their argument is that the younger generation of British Sikhs have diminishing regard for caste-based identities. The Sikh Council UK adamantly assert that the NIESR report is unreliable and represents a distorted bias opinion since its authors interviewed victims of caste-based discrimination from Dalit backgrounds only and did not engage with Sikhs from other castes. The NIESR Report found that there is significant evidence of caste-based discrimination in Britain in the areas of employment, education and in the provision of care services. The Report's recommendation was that legislation is necessary to punish perpetrators of caste discrimination in the three areas highlighted above. The Report suggested that a revision to the definition of "race" in the Equality Act 2010 would accommodate the amendment to include caste. Subsequently, the Sikh Council's Press Release in May 2013 stated the following:

In line with the teaching of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the Sikh Council UK fully supported the sentiments of creating a casteless and equal society but raised serious concerns about the impact of ill-considered legislation based upon flawed research. Following extensive lobbying of Minister, Lords and MPs the Sikh Council UK has been credited with taking a measured, thoughtful, and pragmatic approach in helping resolve a complex issue.

Paradoxically, several testimonies gathered in the various pro-legislation reports have alleged that victims have been discriminated against on the basis of their caste by non-Dalit Sikhs, particularly those from the *Jat* caste (also see Ghuman 2011).

Despite the lack of a definition of caste, which is accepted by both pro and anti-legislation organizations, there are a number of salient features associated with caste that apply to most South Asian communities, the most salient one is that associated with endogamy. As highlighted earlier, endogamy is one area in which caste becomes important amongst the British Sikh, and indeed British Hindu community also. The practice of endogamy was raised by a number of British Sikh individuals who were interviewed by the author for their views towards the legislation:

It is important for me to marry someone of the same caste as me since this is the expectation that my parents and grandparents, and extended family have from me.

(Davinder, Jat, Sikh)

I want my children to be aware of what caste they belong to because this ties them in with their cultural heritage. I would be upset if they married out of caste.

(Harinder, Ramgharia, Sikh)

Caste is a complex topic which seems to indicate that the division of labor in the British context is not an issue any longer. A sense of group identity (e.g., in the lyrics of bhangra songs) is not always necessarily about discrimination but about identifying with one's ingroup. The egalitarian nature of Sikh teachings also extends to rejecting caste-based discrimination. Although on a spiritual level the teachings of the Sikh Gurus reject the notion of ritual purity and conversely ritual pollution through one's birth, the eradication of caste is open to many interpretations (Takhar 2005). The establishment of gurdwaras along caste-based identities clearly demonstrates that caste continues to play a role of Sikh religious establishments to the caste (or indeed faith) of one's prospective spouse. Although endogamy is observed by many Sikhs, intercaste marriages are on the increase amongst British-born Sikhs. Nonobservance of endogamy, in traditional Punjabi society, would be detrimental to the *izzat* of the extended families concerned. Rejection of such attitudes is increasingly being challenged by the younger generation of British-born Sikhs. Maintaining a connection with Panjabi ethnicity is also imperative for many British Panjabi Sikhs. This reflects into lifestyles and accepted norms amongst Sikhs that emanate from the Panjabi culture. The notion of *izzat* "family honor" remains important to most Panjabi Sikhs across the globe.

Conclusion

Caste is a complex issue generally and even more complex when discussing its place and role amongst Sikhs. *Bani* is relatively straightforward on the matter of caste-based discrimination. However, the reality at grassroots level is not simply just about hierarchies but about associations and

heritage too. Guru Nanak taught in the vernacular, that is, the language of the people of the time. This is highly significant in that his message was for the masses and not reserved for a select elite. His concern was very much with the here and now; therefore his teachings focused on one's conduct and attitude in this world, in this life, at the practical level. His teachings contained in the Guru Granth Sahib offer a profound insight into his revolutionary uniqueness of mind in which he endeavored to promote an egalitarian society. In his ideology, all human beings were on a par with one another, regardless of caste, faith, belief, or gender.

Among the various South Asian communities in the UK, there are long-established traditions, conceptions, and associations based on caste. Although Guru Gobind Singh's initiation of the Khalsa institutionalized the use of Singh and Kaur as surnames in 1699 CE, many Sikhs continue to use their family names as a means of identification. This does not, and should not, be equated with such Sikhs having a "caste-ist" mentality that carries the stigma of either pollution or purity. Several young British Sikhs whom I have interviewed have adamantly asserted that there is nothing wrong with identifying as *Jat*, *Ramgharia*, *Bhatra*, *Ravidassi*, and so forth. Their viewpoints are particularly relevant when bearing in mind that much of the work carried out on caste, especially in the Indian context, tends to demonize it without exploring its psychological relevance amongst young British Sikhs. Having said this however, I also appreciate that much work on caste has been undertaken from an empirical and ethnographic approach that highlights the harsh discrimination faced by victims from the Dalit community (Nesbitt 1994; Gorringer and Rafanell 2007).

The very fact that castes overvalue themselves in relation to each other means that there are multiple hierarchies within the caste system (Gupta 2005), and trying to "simplify" the structure of Indian society has added confusion in subsequent understandings of how caste works on the ground. Caste-based identities are not necessarily synonymous with discourses on prejudice and discrimination. Caste-based discrimination (and of course prejudice) is indeed a contradiction of Sikhi, but on the lived reality, it is not always necessarily synonymous with notions of hierarchy and subordination. Caste can be context dependent – it becomes an issue particularly in terms of marriage and may also indicate certain generational trends. Endogamy enforces group membership. Parents, grandparents are concerned about their children marrying into their own ethnicity and faith/religion. Caste also works well in this case for them by reinforcing a sense of continuity and group identity. Caste identity is no different from other identities that can be essentialized or de-essentialized to serve specific functions. For example, a British Sikh emphasizing their "Britishness" when in India.

Ideologically Sikhi denounces caste-based discrimination. From a lived perspective however, caste continues to play a role amongst Sikhs. In practice, caste-based discrimination amongst Sikhs is most evident in the stigma of untouchability, which remains associated with Dalits in particular, the majority of which are increasingly adopting the *Ravidassia* and *Valmiki* labels of faith identity in favor of identifying as Sikhs. These communities also favor the implementation of legislation against caste discrimination in the United Kingdom. Hans (2008) is critical of the fact that caste equality has not been applied on the practical level, despite the egalitarian teachings of Sikhi, especially about Sikhs who came from Dalit (historically oppressed) castes. The remuneration of *Ravidassias*, many of whom adopted the Sikh faith in the hope of eradicating the stigma of untouchability, as numbering 11,000 in England and Wales according to the 2011 Census cannot be ignored.

The role therefore played by *zat* (caste) amongst Sikhs is one that transcends Sikhi, teachings, in favor of Panjabi ethnicity and Panjabi culture. In this respect, therefore, Sikh ethnicity is closely tied in with Panjabi traditions and cultural norms.

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RACISM OR MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

Anti-Sikh Hate Crimes and the Need for Better Recording and Monitoring

Jagbir Jhutti-Johal

Introduction

Since the 1900s Sikhs in the United States of America (hereinafter US) have been regularly subjected to racism and racist attacks. This was also the case in the United Kingdom (hereinafter UK) where racism peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the UK Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs faced hostilities together. Collectively they were labeled with the derogatory term “Pakis.” The Asian Health Agency in partnership with digital works (funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund) states the following:

This first generation to attend schools in England experienced racial abuse, racist attacks, and discrimination as a daily feature of life both in the playground and on the way to and from school as well as on the streets while their parents struggled and worked to provide for their families, Asian children and young people were learning to live with and cope in a different environment without any family or community support against this overt racism. Their personal experiences shattered the myths and beliefs, instilled in them by their parents, that the English were tolerant, fair, and just and that the police, educational and other public institutions, and professionals be afforded almost unchallengeable respect.

(Purewal 2014)

The anti-immigrant sentiment later diversified specifically into an anti-Islamic, anti-Sharia or a “counter-jihad” narrative, which was, and still is a rallying point for nationalist groups in Britain. This is also evident in the US, where, because of white nationalism, toxic and polarized political discourse, and xenophobic sentiment focused especially at the Muslim community resulted in an “othering” often culminating in hate crimes and physical attacks.

The increasingly anti-Islamic focus across right-leaning (and far-right) politics globally has become problematic for all diverse communities, not just Muslims. Moreover, it has not just been restricted to hateful speech, social media campaigns, and petitions against halal meat, angry street protests, or the promotion of divisive politics; it has involved real and direct violence. For example, in 2009 in the UK when the Royal Anglian Regiment staged their homecoming parade in Luton, members of the extremist group Islam4UK demonstrated shouting “Anglian soldiers go to hell!”

This provoked an angry counter-reaction against the Asian community, as a result of which Luton's turbaned Sikh Mayor Lakhbir Singh was kicked to the ground (BBC News 2010). As the intensity of anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic discourse grew, the conflation between race and religion became a common occurrence in both Britain and the US – a phenomenon we describe as the *racialization of Islamophobia*. Not surprisingly, Sikhs became a victim of this phenomenon which has been prevalent in the UK and US contexts.

Sikhs in the UK have been integrated into a pluralist British identity, often being projected as an example of a “model minority” due to the fact that since they first started arriving in the UK in the 1950s, whether via direct migration, or twice migration (from East Africa), there was a strong desire to work hard and succeed. When they found themselves in conflict with the State or employers, they used the law to ensure their rights were met, especially with reference to wearing religious articles of faiths, such as the *kara* and *kirpan*, but most importantly the turban (Singh and Tatla 2006).

As a result, Sikhs have by and large been viewed nationally as “good migrants” who work hard and make a noteworthy contribution to their new homeland via employment and charity. We can see this in Parliamentary debates and even reports written by communities, for example, British Sikh Reports, or Contribution of Sikhs to the UK – UK Parliament (House of Commons. Library 2019). Evidence of their success can be seen in the field of politics with the appointment of Lord Indarjit Singh to the House of Lords in 2011, and the election of the first turban-wearing Sikh MP, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, and the first Sikh female politician, Preet Kaur Gill, in 2017.

Sikhs have also been subjected to generally positive media portrayals and interest. Examples of such media portrayals abound such as the Sikh warriors of the BBC adaption of Peter Dickinson's 1970s novel *The Changes*, to the *English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje in which a central character is Kip – a “sapper” (soldier) who works for the British army during World War II; or Sikh families such as the Panesars portrayed in *Eastenders*, or the Bhamras family in *Bend It Like Beckham*, or the inclusion of a Sikh soldier in Sir Sam Mendes' movie 1917, and by no means least, J.K. Rowling's portrayal of a Sikh family, the Jawanda family, in her novel *The Casual Vacancy*.

Despite these successes and positive contributions to British society, the Sikh community's experiences of racism have not disappeared. A Sikh student has committed suicide in the UK because of racial abuse. Vijay Singh was a 13-year-old boy from Manchester who attended a predominantly white school. He took his own life in 1996 due to racism and bullying. Most children in the school had little understanding why he wore a turban, and he was constantly subjected to bullying and racial slurs such as “Paki! Turban-head! Wrap head!” More problematically, the school itself and some teachers failed to recognize or simply ignored what was going on (Sikhhelpline.com). The evidence suggests that racism towards Sikh children in schools has been on the rise in recent years. A relatively recent incident was recorded in November 2020 when a video went viral of two white boys attacking a Sikh boy who had long hair (shropshirestar.com). Sikhs have always experienced and been subject to some form of racism since arriving in the UK, however, this racist discourse changed after the Salman Rushdie affair in 1989 and the (first) Gulf War, when South Asian communities, such as Hindus and Sikhs, became targets for attack due to racial similarities to the Muslim community, and this was further evident after 9/11. Images of Ayatollah Khamenei, Osama bin Laden, followed by the Taliban in the mainstream media, reinforced the association of beards and turbans with the “enemy” and “terrorism” per se. This in turn fueled hostility towards male Sikhs. *Amritdhari* (initiated), or non-initiated turban-wearing Sikh men, have become particularly vulnerable because the Sikh *dastaar* (turban) and *kesh* (unshorn hair) were often confused with Ayatollah Khamenei or Osama bin Laden's *kaffiyeh* (headdress) and beard. While most of the reported attacks targeted Sikh men, in the last decade, most recently since the EU referendum of June 2016, initiated Sikh women wearing the turban, but also Sikh women who do not wear the turban have been victims of abuse,

such as Suman Kaur in February 2018. However, the narrative on the gendered dimension to Sikh race hate crime is not as strong as that within the Muslim community for whom most attacks are perpetrated on women wearing the *hijab* or *burkha*.

Ironically, while the Sikh community was praised as a “model minority” in the late 1990s for its military contributions to the British war effort in both World Wars, by the early 2000s the same community found that one of its articles of faith, the turban, was transformed from a sacred piece of religious attire to an object of marginalization and became a target for discrimination and “mistaken identity” which in turn unleashed Islamophobic backlash in the form of physical and verbal attacks (Ahluwalia and Pelletiere 2010).

Attacks on Sikhs intensified in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. Since 9/11 the racialization of religious identity began to have real and serious consequences for the Sikh community. Hate crimes, bullying, and bigotry against Sikhs globally, but particularly in the US and UK increased significantly, largely due to their visible articles of faith. Those on the frontline dealing with the post 9/11 backlash in Britain recall the challenges on the ground at the time. Retired Metropolitan Police Detective Sergeant Gurpal Viridi (who is of Sikh heritage himself) told *The Guardian* about a frightening level of ignorance about Sikh identity:

I dealt with a lot of complaints – we had attacks on individuals, even on women. When it [9/11] happened, I was going around police stations to tell the officers the differences between the Taliban and a Sikh because they didn’t know either. And this is London, a multi-cultural area. It doesn’t help when they kept showing images of [Osama bin Laden] and in the UK, it’s the Sikhs who wear a turban.

(Saner 2012)

What is clear is that the racism encountered by Sikhs in the early stages of migration globally took a different turn after 9/11 and in the wake of subsequent terrorist incidences, such as the Boston Marathon Bombing April 15, 2013, USA, or the 2005 London Bombings in London UK, 2017 Manchester Arena attack, political events such as the 2016 Brexit vote, or the fall of Kabul and withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan 2021. Such events contributed to racist and anti-religious hate crimes towards Muslims but also resulted in a spike in attacks on non-Muslims, specifically Sikh because they are perceived to be Muslim. Some of the better-known examples of what was (wrongly) referred to in the media as “mistaken identity” include: (i) the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi in the USA, who had a beard and a turban in accordance with his Sikh faith, was mistaken for an Arab Muslim and murdered on September 15, 2001; (ii) the massacre in 2012, six Sikh victims in Oak Creek, Wisconsin by a white supremacist (Hughes 2012); (iii) in August 2014, an incident in New York City involving Sandeep Singh who was run over and dragged 30 feet after being called a “terrorist” (CBS News); (iv) a similar attack in 2015 on Inderjit Singh Mukker who was attacked and called a “terrorist” and “Bin Laden” in Chicago (Kapla 2015).

After the London bombings in 2005, two gurdwaras were firebombed in Kent and Leeds. On August 16, 2005, a Sikh man had his turban pulled off and was racially abused in Northampton. During heightened community tensions post-Charlie Hebdo, Zack Davies (2015) attempted to kill British-Sikh dentist Sarandeep Bhambra with a machete in a Tesco store in Wales, apparently in revenge for Lee Rigby. The attacker apparently “mistook” Bhambra for a Muslim due to his brown skin and turban. In April 2015, members of the Sikh community in Glasgow found the message “F**k Islam, No Sharia!” next to a Nazi swastika on a wall of the Glasgow Central Gurdwara. At the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara and Sikh Community Centre in Thornaby, vandals sprayed “White power”: Death to Allah,” and “Die Muslims Die” on the outside wall (Blackburn 2015). On

May 14, 2016, when Manchester United versus Bournemouth match at Old Trafford was cancelled due to a bomb scare, there was twitter fury as an Arsenal supporter blamed Sikh football fans for the evacuation by posting an image of Sikh turban-wearing men with a caption that read, “Bomb threat at Old Trafford, I know where my investigation would start” (ibtimes.co.uk).

Since 2020 these incidents became more systematic with increased prevalence online, in person and across continents. For example, in the US, four Sikhs were gunned down at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis (The Pioneer). In 2021, the attack on a 36-year-old Sikh VTA driver in San Jose was reported as a hate crime (CBS News 2021); or again in 2021, the attack on a turban-wearing 32-year-old Sikh Sumit Ahluwalia, who was attacked with a hammer in Brooklyn, New York (Dey 2021). In the UK in 2020 Vaneet Singh, a Sikh taxi driver from Reading, was attacked by four white men who made him remove his turban and asked whether he was a member of the Taliban (BBC News 2020).

At the same time there have been increasing attacks against gurdwaras. In the USA Guru Maneyo Granth Gurdwara Sahib in Orangevale, California, was vandalized with white nationalist graffiti (The Sikh Coalition 2020). In 2021 the Sikh Society of Calgary Gurdwara in the West Springs neighborhood of Calgary, Canada, was vandalized with graffiti. The words “diaper heads” and “cow f— ers” were found spray-painted on the road leading to gurdwara (Bartko et al 2021). Singh Sabha Gurdwara in southeast Edmonton, Canada, received harassing, racist, and anti-Sikh phone calls (Kornik 2021). On Tuesday March 2, 2021, the Siri Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara, in Gravesend, UK, was daubed with a swastika (Smith 2021).

To combat this altered environment characterized by the racialization of religion, Sikh communities in the UK, US, and Europe have developed a new narrative and activism around the phrase “Anti-Sikh hate crimes” or “Anti-Sikh Hate.” However, research demonstrates that it is important to interrogate the data and evidence more carefully to discern whether the hate crime is due to anti-Sikh hate or “mistaken identity” or Islamophobia. Consider, for example, the attack in the USA on Lakhwant Singh in April 2020. Lakwant, a turban wearing Sikhs was attacked in his store in Denver by a man who told him to “go back to your country.” According to law enforcement officials, the suspect, a white man, targeted Singh because he believed he was an “Arab” (Ramachandran 2021). What is clear is that incidents against Sikhs have been and still are misidentified by law enforcement agencies in the UK and US. There are still instances whether that be in the UK or the US, of a recording of a crime as bias against another religion other than the Sikh religion, and this has an impact on the data. In the US, Sikh Coalition lobbied US government to track hate crimes motivated by Anti-Sikh bias, and the FBI began doing this since 2015, and the data suggests a rise in hate crime incidences against Sikhs, but not to the extent that the community says attacks are occurring (The Sikh Coalition 2015).

United States

Since 2015 data from the FBI showed a continuous rise in attacks against Sikhs. In 2015 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 0.4% (6 offences) were Anti-Sikh (FBI 2015 Hate Crime Statistics). In 2016 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 0.5% (7 offences) were anti-Sikh (FBI 2016 Hate Crime Statistics). In 2017 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 1.4% were anti-Sikh (FBI 2015 Hate Crime Statistics). If we look at the data from 2017 there were over 8,400 hate crime incidents – including 24 against Sikhs, 15 against Hindus, and over 300 against Muslims (FBI 2017 Hate Crime Statistics).

The Sikh Coalition argued that the figure under-represented the problem because they had also received 12 anti-Sikh hate crime cases, which showed that members of the community were still not reporting attacks to officials (The Economic Times 2018). In 2018 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 60 incidents; therefore 4.1% were anti-Sikh, making the community the third most targeted religious group after Jews and Muslims in the US. This signified a 200% increase in reported anti-Sikh hate crimes from 2017 to 2018 (FBI 2018 Hate Crime Statistics). In 2019 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 49 incidents; therefore 3.0% were anti-Sikh (FBI 2019 Hate Crime Statistics). In 2020 hate crimes motivated by religious bias accounted for 1,354 offences reported by law enforcement. A breakdown of the bias motivation of religious-biased offences showed 89 anti-Sikh incidents, up 82% from 49 to 89, from 2019 to 2020 (The United States Department of Justice 2020).

What is clear is that in the US, Sikhs are the third most targeted faith community in the United States of America (following anti-Islamic and anti-Jewish hate crimes and bias incidents). However, community groups like Sikh Coalition argue that the data reported to the FBI is imperfect and does not accurately account for all hate crimes against communities (The Sikh Coalition 2021).

United Kingdom

In 2016, the Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) which links more than 130 UK gurdwaras and other UK Sikh organizations in active cooperation to enhance the image and understanding of Sikhism, lobbied the British government to encourage police forces across England and Wales to report religious hate crime voluntarily. As a result, from 2017 all police forces began to deploy the category of “religion” to disaggregate their hate crime data. The Government’s Official Statistics Hate Crime, England and Wales, recorded that the number of hate crimes reached 94,098, from April 2017 to March 2018 – a rise of 17%. About 76% were classified as “race hate.” Where the perceived religion of the victim was recorded, 2% of religious hate crime offences were targeted against Sikhs (117 offences, see Yearly Official Statistics).

Home Office statistics for 2018/19 recorded 188 incidents against “Sikh,” which is 3% of all recorded (perceived) religious hate crimes in England and Wales. In 2019/2020 there were 202 incidents against “Sikh,” which is 3% of all recorded (perceived) religious hate crimes in England and Wales. This was a 7% rise from the previous year. In 2020/21 there were 112 incidents against “Sikh,” which is 2% of all recorded (perceived) religious hate crimes in England and Wales. Home Office statistics for 2021 to March 2022 recorded 301 incidents against “Sikh,” which is 4% of all recorded (perceived) religious hate crimes in England and Wales. This represented a 169% rise from the previous year when numbers may have been lower due to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. A comparison with the 2021/22 figures with pre-COVID figures of 2019/20 represents a 49% increase in incidents against Sikhs. The rise in hate crimes (disability, sexual orientation, and religious hate crimes) in 2021/2022 have raised questions and

the Home Office said that it was unclear how much the rise in hate crime was due to genuine increases in crime or to continuing improvements in police recording processes and practices. It also said that growing awareness of hate crime is likely to have led to better identification of such offences, as well as more victims having the confidence to come forward.

(Michalel Goodier 2022)

Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police¹, by the perceived targeted religion, 2017/18

<i>Numbers and percentages</i>	England and Wales, recorded crime	
	Number of offences	%
Perceived religion of the victim		
Buddhist	19	0
Christian	264	5
Hindu	58	1
Jewish	672	12
Muslim	2,965	52
Sikh	117	2
Other	311	5
No religion	237	4
Unknown	1,174	21
Total number of targeted religions	5,817	
Total number of offences	5,680	

Source: Police recorded crime, Home Office
See Bulletin Table B1 for detailed footnotes.

Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police¹, by the perceived targeted religion, 2018/19

<i>Numbers and percentages</i>	England and Wales, recorded crime	
	2018/19	
Perceived religion of the victim	Number of offences	%
Buddhist	19	0
Christian	535	7
Hindu	114	2
Jewish	1,326	18
Muslim	3,530	47
Sikh	188	3
Other	535	7
No religion	215	3
Unknown	1,255	17
Total number of targeted religions	7,717	
Total number of offences	7,446	

Source: Police recorded crime, Home Office
See Bulletin Table 3 for detailed footnotes.

The UK figures since 2017 indicate that attacks are increasing against Sikhs, and whilst they are still low compared to attacks against the Muslim and Jewish communities, the Sikh community is arguing that these figures are not a true reflection of what is happening due to a number of factors, such as (i) not reporting incidences; (ii) hate crimes where the victim is of a Sikh heritage possibly

Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police¹, by the perceived targeted religion, year ending March 2020

Numbers and percentages		England and Wales
Perceived religion of the victim	Number of offences 2019/20	% 2019/20
Buddhist	21	0
Christian	531	9
Hindu	114	2
Jewish	1,205	19
Muslim	3,089	50
Sikh	202	3
Other	432	7
No religion	70	1
Unknown	823	13
Total number of targeted religions	6,487	
Total number of offences	6,205	

Police recorded crime, Home Office. Figures exclude GMP and Nottinghamshire. See Bulletin Table 3 for detailed footnotes.

1. In some offences more than one religion has been recorded as being targeted, therefore the sum of the proportions do not add to 100%. 2.5

Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police¹, by the perceived targeted religion year ending March 2022

Numbers and percentages		England and Wales
Perceived religion of the victim	Number of offences 2021/22	%2021/22
Buddhist	35	0
Christian	701	8
Hindu	161	2
Jewish	1,919	23
Muslim	3,459	42
Sikh	301	4
Other	403	5
No religion	209	3
Unknown	1,426	17
Total number of targeted religions	8,615	
Total number of offences	8,307	

Source: Police recorded crime, Home Office.

NOTES:

1. In some offences more than one religion has been recorded as being targeted. therefore the sum of the proportions do not add to 100% .

being recorded under different flags aside from religion, for example, if they become victim of a homophobic attack; or (iii) if they are targeted in a racially aggravated attack. We must be cognizant that figures may not be an accurate reflection of what is happening. As I argued with Hardeep Singh in *Racialisation, Islamophobia and Mistaken Identity: The Sikh Experience* (2019), it is difficult to claim that this rise in attacks is something new. It is difficult to accept that these figures are accurate or comparable with past figures either due to underreporting, or because the community does not fully trust the police and the law courts to properly address, or more importantly, because of the unavailability of official statistics recording such attacks on the Sikh community separately because hate crimes against Sikhs have and are wrongly recorded as Islamophobic incidents by police. It is also true that in some instances Sikh victims may have not known the difference between a “hate crime” and a “hate incident” and may not have reported what happened. Additionally, we cannot know whether attacks are becoming more common or whether the increase is due to more Sikhs reporting incidences due to community groups campaigning and telling Sikhs to report and document all incidences. In the US, Sikh Coalition has advocated reporting of such incidences via community developed *Report Hate* website, while in the UK organizations such as Sikh Council UK have advocated for reporting via *Sikh Aware UK* in the early stages (Sikh Council UK 2017), which was not successful, and led to a newly developed website called *Sikh Guard* launched in January 2022. Despite this, Sikhs in the UK are way behind the curve when compared to the very well-established and funded third party reporting organizations catering for both the Muslim (Tell MAMA) and Jewish communities (CST), who have established data sharing agreements with multiple police forces (Jewish News 2015). This means Muslim and Jewish victims of hate crime are more likely to report incidents in the first place whilst having professional advocacy in place on their behalf.

Community organizations in the UK and USA argue that the figures reported are still misleading and lead to inaccurate conclusions and policy implications for Sikhs. As community organizations working with their respective communities, they have witnessed a rise in attacks and believe that the figures reported do not necessarily equate to what is happening on the ground and that governments need to do more to strengthen monitoring of hate crime. This was particularly evident in two UK Reports: 2016 UK Sikh Survey (The Sikh Network 2016) and the All-Party parliamentary Group (APPG) for British Sikhs published *A Report into Anti-Sikh Hate Crimes* (October 2020). Both argued that Anti-Sikh Hate was growing but was invisible to the government and police and that it needed to be treated similarly to Islamophobia and antisemitism. However, both reports had startling figures of attacks against Sikhs and these numbers raised several questions about the robustness of the data.

The Sikh Federation, UK and Sikh Network argued in 2016 that the Sikh community had been “invisible to the government since 9/11” despite a rising tide of hate crimes after one in five Sikhs reported experiencing public discrimination in the 2016 UK Sikh Survey (Kersley 2020).

The 2016 report equated that the percentage of responders to the percentage of Sikhs in the UK, leading to some startling claims, such as the following:

- “Over 100,000 hate crimes against Sikhs aged 16 and over in the last 12 months” (p. 5).
- More than 1 in 5 or 21% of those taking part in the survey have personally experienced race hate crime, that is, verbal, or physical abuse in the last 12 months (p. 9). To get from 21% of the sample to a population estimate, it appears the report has taken 21% of the population (around 430,000). But the sample does not include people under 16 (about 20 25%), so the wrong population figure is being used. Nevertheless, 21% is a very high figure, and it may be distorted by nonresponse bias (those not experiencing it may be more likely to be indifferent to taking part).



Figure 37.5 UK Sikh Survey 2016 p9.

www.thesikhnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/UK-Sikh-Survey-2016-Findings-FINAL.pdf

In 2016, at the time of the Brexit referendum **21% or 1 in 5 of Sikhs** responding to the UK Sikh Survey⁴ had experienced hate crimes in the last 12 months. This equates to over 100,000 Sikhs being the subject of hate crimes each year.



Figure 37.6 APPG for British Sikhs (October 2020) *A Report into Anti-Sikh Hate Crimes* p5.

www.thesikhnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/APPG-Anti-Sikh-Hate-Crime-Report-2020.pdf

What was clear was that the estimate is far in excess of the government figures released for 2015/16 (Jhutti-Johal 2017), which reported that there were 62,518 offences overall, and out of which, 4,400 (7%) were religious hate crimes (Corcoran and Smith 2016).

More recently, Preet Kaur Gill MP, the chair of the APPG for British Sikhs, which published *A Report into Anti-Sikh Hate Crimes*, said hate crimes against Sikhs had increased by 70% between 2018 and 2020 (Kersley 2020 and Philips 2020). This statement raises a number of questions about the robustness of community data because Home Office figures for 2018/19 recorded 188 hate crimes against Sikhs and in 2019/2020 202 hate crimes against Sikhs. This is an increase of 14 incidents from 2018/19, thus a 7.4% increase and not 70%.

Conclusion

Whilst attacks may not be on the same level as those on Muslims and Jews, they are increasing most likely because of mistaken identity or racism, rather than anti-Sikh hate, and things do need to change to achieve and promote parity for all victims of religious and racial hatred. Sikhs globally have claimed that they have been “invisible” to policy makers when there has been a big rise in anti-Sikh hate crime. In the UK, the APPG for British Sikhs have proposed “Anti-Sikh hate” to describe hate crimes against Sikhs. This is also the term used in the United States of America to identify racist or religious incidents or crimes against Sikhs. However, it is important that we have a proper definition of what “anti-Sikh hate” is. The APPG for British Sikhs in its 2020 report defines it as “any incident or crime which is perceived by the victim or any other person to be religiously or racially motivated by hostility, hatred or prejudice against Sikhs or those perceived to be Sikh people, Gurdwaras, organisations or property” (APPG 2020). However, when looking at attacks against Sikhs in the US and UK, this definition seems problematic, and it is actually amiss if we do not clarify that the actual crime is anti-Muslim and that the actual victim is Sikh rather than the hostility being anti-Sikh or hatred of Sikhs per se.

In recent times in a globally connected world, the actions by one terrorist group such as ISIS or the Taliban has led to counter-reactions, which have had an impact on non-Muslim men because race and religion are interlinked. The early prejudice and racism Sikhs faced has evolved over time from an anti-immigrant prejudice, through to the current anti-Islam or Islamophobic discourse. As a result, Sikh turban wearing men have become victims of anti-Muslim/Islam hatred and hostility because they are perceived to be Muslim because of their “visible” identity – turbans and beards.

Sikhs have been ignored or have been “invisible” in the data collection due to underreporting, lack of religious literacy of professionals to understand the nature of an attack that resulted in a misclassification of incidences, which portrays a dramatic increase in attacks against a particular community and not many against another.

To address the issue of mistaken identity and “invisibility” in data, the Sikh community globally has become more involved in social, civic, and political engagement so that it can increase awareness amongst the public about who they are and what the five Ks represent. Whilst one notes the problems with a definition such as “anti-Sikh hate” crimes, the Sikh community globally since 2001 has used this term when working to educate policy makers at all levels of government, but also the police and other law enforcement agencies such as the courts about attacks on Sikhs. For example, in the US the Sikh Coalition have “partnered with the Department of Justice, the FBI, and with states like New Jersey and California to develop training materials that educate law enforcement on the Sikh American community to increase the rate of hate crime reporting and prosecution” (The Sikh Coalition 2022). In the UK, organizations such as City Sikhs, Sikh Federation UK, and Network of Sikh Organisations have fed into Home Office, Crown Prosecution Service, and police

consultations on hate crimes. It is instructive to note that City Sikhs represents a new development in the Sikh community to establish apolitical organizations that engage with the wider community on interfaith activities. It is an organization of young professional Sikhs who aim to provide a voice for professional Sikhs whilst empowering people to create positive change within society as a whole. They have researched issues that affect Sikhs in the United Kingdom and have published data annually in the British Sikh Report since 2013.

The Deputy Director of Network of Sikh Organizations has successfully ensured that hate crime guides (produced as part of a project funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime) for the community have been made available in both English and Punjabi (Together Against Hate 2020). Amongst others, the guides have been used by Northampton Police with the local Sikh community.

Through such engagement, organizations in their respective countries have advocated successfully for accurate data via the disaggregation of attacks by race and religion because they are entirely distinct concepts, and there is a need to avoid conflating them. Since the disaggregation of attacks by race or religion while incidences still seem low, governments and professionals can better understand the differences in the incidences and design evidence-based policies to tackle race hate crime and protect communities, whether that is funding to protect places of worship or providing other support to monitor and track hate crimes. This data, alongside an analysis of the cases and the language used, that is, whether specific anti-Muslim slurs such as "Taliban," "bin Laden," or "rag head" will allow us to better gauge whether attacks are anti-Sikh hate crimes or due to racism and mistaken identity, which seems to be the case from looking at most incidences to date. As has been suggested to the CPS at a recent National Scrutiny Panel, it may assist if the police record both the "actual" and "perceived" victims of hate crime. For example, a Sikh may be called "ISIS" or "Taliban" and inform the police that they perceive the incident to be motivated by a hostility towards their race, that is, "racist." This would then likely be recorded as racist hate crime. The motivation here, however, is more likely to be "anti-Islam," so could possibly be recorded under an "Islamophobic" hate crime flag. In this instance, the "actual victim" is a Sikh, but the perpetrator likely perceived them to be Muslim due to ignorance or "mistaken identity." To add yet another layer of complexity, under law – Sikhs and Jews can be defined as both racial and religious group, so does an incident such as this get recorded twice under two hate crime flags? Or could it be that figures for "racist" crimes against Sikhs would be more appropriately recorded under religion? Sikh groups have been defining crimes against them as "anti-Sikh" rather than "Sikhophobia," but when many of these incidents are motivated by hostility towards Islam or Muslims, would it not be more accurate to suggest "anti-Sikh" is a reference to the "actual" victim, rather than anti-Sikhism sentiment or hatred of Sikhs?

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ATHEISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND IRRELIGIOSITY

Robin Rinehart

Introduction

What does it mean when people of Sikh heritage describe themselves using terms such as “Sikh atheist” or “cultural Sikh?” The English-language terms that are applied to those who reject or question religion (or their *dharma*) – atheist, agnostic, irreligious, spiritual but not religious, and so forth – may sometimes obscure as much as they clarify. This is not simply the result of Western scholars uncritically applying those terms; they are also adopted by people of Sikh background, both in English and in Punjabi. Although “*nāstik*” is sometimes used in Punjabi and Hindi, and translated into English as “atheist,” it earlier referred to a person who rejected the authority of the Vedas, or the doctrine of *saṃsāra*, and is rarely used by Sikh nonbelievers. In any given group of people who identify themselves as “religious,” there is likely to be a range of involvement and knowledge, from those with a daily practice, to those who may only participate in major festivals and rites. There is a similar range among those who do not identify as “religious,” from vocal atheists highly critical of any belief in a deity to those who identify as “irreligious” but nonetheless maintain a cultural connection to the tradition in which they were raised. The usage of both Western and Indic terminology makes the terminology around such irreligiosity complex and often imprecise. The term “*dharma*,” used by Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, while often translated as “religion,” has a quite different semantic range.

Atheism, agnosticism, irreligiosity, and the like, while in use for non-Western religions such as Sikhism, initially came about as concepts that expressed rejection of or opposition to Western religions, typically Judeo-Christian traditions. Defining oneself as an atheist or agnostic, for example, is assigning primacy to belief as fundamental to religion. To be an atheist from a Christian background means rejecting belief in foundational Christian theological tenets such as the triune God. To be a Jewish agnostic is to be uncertain about belief in God as understood in Jewish tradition. Terms such as “atheist” may also imply sharp boundaries between believers and non-believers, particularly in the context of what was termed “New Atheism” in the early twenty-first century. New Atheist authors tend to be dismissive of religion in its entirety (with their sharpest critiques generally directed towards Christianity and Islam) and are often derisive towards religious people. Yet when people of Sikh heritage describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or cultural Sikh, their main assertion may not simply be not believing in or questioning the existence of God, nor may they be rejecting Sikhi in

its entirety. In trying to understand what it means to reject some of or one's entire heritage as a Sikh, we are immediately faced with a welter of terminology.

In addition to identifying as atheists, agnostics, or cultural Sikh, people of Sikh background have also adopted terms such as "positive humanist" and "rationalist" to characterize their worldviews. Other terms include "irreligious," "skeptical," "freethinker," and "secularist," or some combination. Such terms typically reflect a wish to move beyond from the primarily oppositional nature of atheism and agnosticism (defining oneself primarily in terms of what one does not believe) and instead define what someone does consider important. And while irreligious Sikhs level a host of criticisms at key components of Sikh practice (and indeed at times, more devout Sikhs may share some of their critiques), it is also quite common for them to have deep respect for some aspects of Sikhi. To understand the range of Sikh irreligiosity, then, it is important to look not only at what is rejected but also what may be retained.

Two of the best-known examples of people of Sikh heritage who have written extensively about their rejection of some part of their Sikh identity are celebrated freedom fighter Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), who declared himself an atheist, and journalist, novelist, and historian Khushwant Singh (1915–2014), who referred to himself as an agnostic. There are others about whose rejection of religion we know less; for example, the painter Amrita Sher Gill (1913–1941), whose father was Sikh, is reported to have been expelled from a Catholic school for describing herself as an atheist. Beyond these few notable twentieth-century examples, the explosion of social media has created a forum for a wide range of exploration, debate, and critique of Sikhi. Social media postings questioning and rejecting Sikhi, and especially the comments they generate, provide especially rich information, though typically with the informality and at times inconsistency characteristic of the medium. In addition to social media postings that are publicly viewable, there are English and Punjabi-language closed and secret groups on social media, some with thousands of members, with regular postings involving critique of different aspects of *dharma*, from religious leaders portrayed as fraudulent and exploitive to more philosophical musings on issues such as the lack of evidence for the existence of God. It is important to acknowledge as well those who quietly nurture their own doubts or dismissal, those who in English might be termed "village atheists," providing their trenchant commentary on religion to those around them, even if they are not writing about it in some form.

For some, rejection of religion remains largely an individual matter, or perhaps something discussed only anonymously online, but others participate in groups that seek to highlight what they understand as the shortcomings of *dharma* or religion. Many of these organizations focus on a set of principles that they apply to all religions, and their memberships thus typically include people from a range of religious backgrounds, including Sikhism. The designation "rationalist" is particularly common in India, where there are a number of regional rationalist groups, as well as the umbrella organization Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (see, e.g., Quack 2011).

Critiques of what may be termed "superstitious" beliefs and practices (*vahim*, *bharam*, *pakhaṇḍ*/*pākhaṇḍ*) are a key characteristic of rationalist movements in India. The Tarksheel Society, Punjab, established by Megh Raj Mittar in 1984, is "an organization committed to the objectives of inculcating scientific and rational thinking among the people" as a counter to "various superstitions, rituals, charms, tantriks, fortune-tellers, godmen, 'religious fanatics, occult practices etc.'" (<https://tarksheel.org/index.php/about-us>). Rationalists generally thus address their criticisms to beliefs and practices shared across religious boundaries, such as belief in miracles, astrology, numerology, ghosts, spirits, and possessions. They frequently cite Article 51A(h) of the Indian constitution, which states, "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform." People of Sikh heritage are among the Tarksheel Society's staff and members, and its publications and social media postings often address Sikh practices.

The availability of social media affords the opportunity to create virtual communities in which people can explore ideas that might be risky in other contexts. These discussions are also a reminder that people's views on religion are often not simply about the one closest to their own experience. Part of constructing one's religious identity is adopting a stance towards other religions as well, and online discussions show that it is often this process of analyzing religion overall that shapes many people's perspective. One can find comment threads in which former Sikhs, Christians, and Jews share and compare their experiences and reasons for rejecting the traditions in which they were brought up. Nonbelievers may also find a connection with earlier Indian groups such as the Cārvākas, a materialist school of thought.

Unfortunately, there is limited demographic detail available about irreligious Sikhs either in the diaspora or India, which does not provide much nuance with respect to lack of religious affiliation in its census. The Indian census category of "Sikh" may well include Sikhs who consider themselves "cultural" Sikhs but who are not necessarily religious; it is also possible that some may be included in the blanket categories of "Others" or "Religion Not Stated." In the 2011 census of India, only 569 residents of the state of Punjab identified as atheist (Tikku 2016). Critics, however, note the fact that people may be reluctant to disclose their irreligiosity, as well as the limitations of the categories available in most surveys tracking religious affiliation. For example, a 2015 Pew Research Center survey (Majumdar 2018) used the category "Other" to include "Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Jews, adherents of folk religions and *those with no religious affiliation* [emphasis added]." In many parts of the world, the numbers of religiously unaffiliated people are increasing, and this possibly holds true for Sikhism as well. The evidence of published and online materials does clearly show that more men than women choose to share their irreligiosity, but it is not possible to determine to what extent this reflects actual numbers of people versus social and cultural factors that may inhibit women's participation in discussions about rejecting religion. It is, however, fair to say that in the context of critique of Sikhi, analysis of gender issues, while present, has thus far received less attention than it has in the critiques of religions such as Christianity and Islam.

Bhagat Singh, Atheist, and Khushwant Singh, Agnostic

Bhagat Singh, convicted for his role in a bombing and the murder of a police officer, and hanged at 23, was a prolific and profound writer whose works included the essay "Why I Am An Atheist" and other pieces addressing religious faith and practice. Celebrated as a freedom fighter and martyr, and lauded by many for his willingness to use force to fight against the injustices of British rule, he has been the subject of at least seven Bollywood films, and his image is found on coasters, T-shirts, and other trinkets sold at market stalls throughout the Punjab, including those surrounding the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Behind the popular culture portrayals, which may downplay or deny his atheism, however, lies a more complex figure, who had much to say about religion, politics, and society – effectively, dharma – in his all too short life.

Bhagat Singh was raised in a Sikh family and was knowledgeable about a wide range of both religious and social practices. His grandfather was affiliated with the Arya Samaj, and other family members were members of the Ghadar party, which sought revolution against British rule. Bhagat Singh attended an Arya Samaj high school, and later National College in Lahore. He read and studied widely, taking copious notes (many of which are preserved in his jail notebook), as he developed his vision for a socialist India that would unite through overcoming religious superstition and bigotry (see, e.g., Habib 2018: 32).

Bhagat Singh wrote his 1930 essay "Why I Am An Atheist" from jail, in response to a friend's criticism that his atheism was due more to vanity than any reasoned rejection of his heritage. To counter

that assertion, Bhagat Singh explained that in fact he had “stopped believing in God when [he] was an obscure young man” (Habib 2018: 50). While in college, he still believed in God, but “could never believe in the mythology and doctrines of Sikhism or any other religion” (Habib 2018: 51). Initially a “romantic idealist revolutionary,” he turned to intense study. “My previous faith and convictions underwent a remarkable modification. The romance of the violent methods alone, which was so prominent amongst our predecessors, was replaced by serious ideas. No more mysticism, no more blind faith. Realism became our cult” (Habib 2018: 52). Knowing that he was to be hanged, he remained firm in the conviction that nothing of him would survive death.

Bhagat Singh valued criticism and independent thinking over following any leaders (Habib 2018: 54–55). He argued that faith was a deterrent to human progress, for this led to clashes both within and between religions, since everyone considers themselves in the right (Habib 2018: 57). “An individual who claims to be a realist has to challenge all of ancient faith. . . . Then the first thing for him is to shatter it and clear a space for the emergence of a new philosophy” (Habib 2018: 57).

Bhagat Singh asked believers why god would have created a world so full of misery and woe, “a veritable hell, a place of constant and bitter unrest” (Habib 2018: 58). He questioned why a supposedly omnipotent god would not stop those who do bad deeds (Habib 2018: 61). He argued vehemently against rebirth, suggesting that karma functioned effectively as retributive punishment and that such punishment had been proven ineffective in comparison to reformation (Habib 2018: 60). He suggested that reading the works of Charles Darwin was the best way to understand the origin of the world and humans rather than any creation story (Habib 2018: 61–62).

Despite his Marxist inclinations, Bhagat Singh did not believe that religion arose solely as a means of exploitation. Instead, his view was psychological:

My own idea is that having realised the limitations of man, his weaknesses and shortcomings having been brought into consideration, God was brought into imaginary existence to encourage man to face boldly all the trying circumstances, to meet all dangers manfully and to check and restrain his outbursts in prosperity and affluence.

In an introduction to Lala Ramsaran Das’ book of English poems, *The Dreamland*, he further suggested that belief in God comes about due to mysticism, which is a consequence of depression (Habib 2018: 66).

Bhagat Singh’s atheism involved a thoroughgoing critique of both British colonial rule and Indian society, informed by his study of socialist thought. Unlike some atheist authors who emphasize relentless critique of religion, Bhagat Singh advocated a revolution that would bring about “a programme of systematic reconstruction of society on a new and better basis” (Habib 2018: 65). His atheism was not simply a rejection of the concept of god and religious practice – in a sense, it was advocacy for an upending and reshaping of virtually everything that would fall under the umbrella of *dharma*, especially caste. Noting the ubiquity of caste practices across Indian society, including among Sikhs, he argued that religion as a whole is socially divisive. In a 1928 essay on untouchability, he wrote, “We Indians boast of our spiritualism, but then, we avoid accepting every human being as a fellow being just like ourselves” (Habib 2018: 18). Still, he used an example from Sikh history to illustrate his argument – mentioning that untouchables were the backbone of Guru Gobind Singh’s army, he advocated treating them as fellow humans rather than having them go through Sikh, Hindu, or Islamic conversion ceremonies (Habib 2018: 21–22).

The complete revolution Bhagat Singh envisioned would clear the way for a “systematic reconstruction of society on a new and better basis” (Habib 2018: 65). There would be no national or racial hatred, and without conflicting interests, there would be no cause for war. A truly communist

society would need no charity, for there would be no poor (Habib 2018: 68–69). In a 1923 essay on the Punjabi language, he emphasized the need for a shared language and script that would allow Punjabis to overcome communal differences. Executed at just 23, Bhagat Singh had no opportunity to continue to develop and refine his thought as inevitably happens with greater life experience. Nonetheless, he remains a powerful symbol for those who doubt religion, his photo on the profile page of many irreligious Sikh social media accounts.

Khushwant Singh continued writing well into his nineties, giving us a chance to see how experience, observation, and reflection affected his views over time. Raised in a devout Sikh family, he maintained and treasured his Sikh identity and found the study of Sikh history fulfilling. But he decided he was agnostic as a young man and did not shy away from criticizing what he saw as hypocrisy in religious practice and inconsistencies in religious belief, even while acknowledging some of his own seeming inconsistencies. Though his agnosticism did not waver, he cherished the experience of Sikh daily prayers and listened to them often in the last years of his life. Critical of practices deemed unscientific or superstitious, such as astrology, he also confessed to a lifelong fear of ghosts.

Like Bhagat Singh, he speculated about the origin of religion, suggesting that it arose due to fear of the unknown; he also thought that modern religion had become obsessed with trivia such as dress and dietary regulations once law became the province of the nation-state and not the dictates of dharma. As a young man, Khushwant Singh was troubled by what he saw as the commercialization of rituals such as *akhaṇḍ pāṭh*, as well as Sikh prejudice against Muslims. He concluded that religion brought out the worst in people; nonetheless, he did not think India could ever do away with it (K. Singh 2012b: 210–215).

Khushwant Singh was sharply critical of the tendency of religions, including Sikhism, to splinter into many sects (K. Singh 2012b: 54). He questioned and ultimately rejected God's existence, the authority of religious leaders and sacred texts, the sanctity of places of worship, and the power of prayer (even if comforting). Where the faithful saw the "hand of God" in the outcome of events, he saw simple coincidences. He pondered suffering and injustice and concluded that their inescapability gave no support for the notion of a just and omnipotent god. Scriptures he termed "repetitive, banal, and illogical." He spoke of religious leaders as parasites who produce "palmfuls of prasad." Religious rituals he found noisy and bothersome. Though he kept long hair and wore a turban, he found little rationale for the Five Ks (K. Singh 2012b: 122). He decried hypocrisy and often opined that those who made the greatest show of their piety were likely to be the most corrupt. Prayer and meditation produced "no material benefit"; indeed, the restless and agitated are more likely to create great art, literature, and science (K. Singh 2002: 374–377). "Reason and logic helped me to demolish much I had been brought up on, but they did not give me all the answers I was looking for," he wrote, and so decided to create a "personal religion" (K. Singh 2002: 371).

Khushwant Singh's personal religion involved a strong work ethic, a commitment to social service and not asceticism, and the effort to do no harm. He considered ahimsa, or non-injury, the "supreme faith" (K. Singh 2002: 379). He also took aim at religious enjoinders to produce many children, advocating instead that one child is enough, and suggested burial rather than cremation to protect forests (K. Singh 2002: 381–382). He never found evidence for life after death or rebirth and so chose to live life to the fullest (K. Singh 2002: 408–409). Despite his rejection of much of Sikhi, he wrote of his respect for the Sikh gurus and found their words comforting and inspiring. In the postscript to his autobiography, reaffirming his agnosticism, he wrote, "What does all this amount to? Not very much. I don't know where I came from, I don't know the purpose of my existence; I don't know where I will go when I die" (K. Singh 2002: 411). In 2012, he published *The Freethinker's Prayer Book*, with short passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Qur'an, the Bible, and poets such as Amir Khusro, William Blake, and Emily Dickinson, writing in the introduction

(K. Singh 2012a: xiv) that “I would sum up my faith in a time-worn cliché: a good life is the only religion.”

Both Bhagat Singh and Khushwant Singh found religion to be a divisive rather than unifying feature of society, and each grappled with questions of theodicy and human suffering. Each also proffered psychological explanations for belief in a deity. Khushwant Singh, nonetheless, found much of value and comfort in Sikh tradition.

Sikh Irreligiosity and Social Media

The issues that Bhagat Singh and Khushwant Singh raised in their analyses of Sikh tradition and religion overall continue to find expression in more recent critiques, and like, Khushwant Singh, there are those who while questioning belief in God nonetheless choose to maintain some aspects of Sikh practice. Social media has created a space for greater numbers of those who question Sikhi to share their thoughts, and as such it provides some of the most fascinating and detailed information about Sikh irreligiosity. The discussions that take place on various question and answer forums also illumine the doubts and questions that believers may struggle with as well; often the most poignant responses to questions posed by Sikhs expressing doubts come from other Sikhs who describe how they too have gone through phases of questioning, even if they subsequently embraced faith.

While authors such as Bhagat Singh and Khushwant Singh crafted organized, thoroughgoing critiques of religion, online discussions can be a bit chaotic, often starting with one topic and veering into others. Online discussions can at times seem incomplete or even superficial. However, it is possible to identify key themes that people mention playing a role in their move towards choosing to be an atheist, agnostic, rationalist, humanist, or cultural Sikh. Such discussions of course are limited to those who have Internet access and choose to partake in these conversations, and the relative anonymity of online forums means that we cannot fully assess the demographic characteristics of the irreligious. However, it is safe to say that many, though certainly not all, are in the Sikh diaspora, and the majority who choose to comment online are male.

The website “Irreligious Sikhs,” billing itself as “a place for Irreligious yet Cultural Sikhs (Sikh Secularist, Sikh Humanist, Sikh Atheist (Positive Atheism), Sikh Agnostic and Skeptical Sikh Promoting Culture of Sikhism) to share, meet, and blog,” was launched in 2012. Though the site is no longer active, people continue to comment on its various pages, and it remains a thorough, well-organized introduction to ideas that are expressed widely elsewhere online. Its author posed the question, “Why can’t there be Sikh atheists?” with the reply “I am an atheist but culturally I am a Sikh.” Distinguishing between religion and spirituality, the author opined that “spiritualism is secular,” praised Sufi poet Bullhe Shah as a Punjabi humanist, and also noted that the *Guru Granth Sahib* includes the poetry of many non-Sikhs (irreligioussikhs.blogspot.com). The site included an extensive, annotated list of noted Sikh non-believers, links to videos in which Sikhs explain why they are not religious, as well as other atheist, humanist, and other nonreligious groups, and famous nonbelievers from other religions. While the majority of the material on the site is in English, it also links to Tarksheel Society resources in Punjabi and Hindi.

Continuing the theme of crafting one’s identity as an “irreligious Sikh,” there are various discussion threads online in which people respond to questions about whether it’s possible to be a Sikh and an atheist or a Sikh and an agnostic. An anonymous poster (2015) on Quora.com asked about being a Sikh and an atheist. While one respondent reassured the person asking the question that it is possible to be a very happy cultural Sikh, another declared that Sikhism is not a religion, that it does not impose the presence of God, and that therefore one can be an atheist and a Sikh at the same

time. As in many such online discussions, appeals to personal experience often take precedence over more detailed arguments and evidence for particular views.

Some pose hypothetical questions that generate fascinating discussions. A UK-based author using the screen name “Harry Haller,” for example, identifying himself as coming from a Khatri Sikh background, posed the question “Is Atheism the Ultimate Sikhi?” (2011) on the website sikhphilosophy.net. He postulated that one could argue that the best Sikh is an atheist because his or her only interest would be service or seva solely for the purpose of diminishing human suffering, and not out of a wish for one’s own salvation. One respondent argued against this valuing of seva over belief in god, arguing that “it always seems to me that atheists who really like Sikhism do not want to give up atheism. Thus, they find ways to transform Sikhi into something that works for them, rather than transforming themselves into something that is Sikhi.” Harry Haller seemed to reject the possibility of actually being an irreligious Sikh; he replied that while seva was the only aspect of Sikhi that interested him, he believed that “there is no such thing as an atheist Sikh, either you believe or you do not.”

Comments from atheist and other nonreligious Sikhs often appear as part of broader social media discussions of Punjabi culture in India and elsewhere, with jabs at the excessive materialism surrounding festivals and weddings, the perceived greed and hypocrisy of religious leaders, and long sermons and tortuous politics at the gurdwara. The persistence of caste practices among Sikhs is another frequent target, especially with respect to marriage, and unbridled celebration of Jat identity. Such discussions often seek to draw a boundary between “religion” and “culture,” with practices with which one disagrees typically being relegated to the “culture” category. The religious and irreligious alike may find common ground in raising these issues.

Questions about the Five Ks, especially keeping one’s hair uncut and wearing a turban, recur frequently in discussion threads about Sikh atheism and agnosticism. Many teens who express their atheism or agnosticism mention fear about their parents’ and family’s reactions if they should choose to cut their hair; a number of young men confess that they continue keeping long hair and wearing a turban only out of respect for their parents (see, e.g., the comments on the 2012 video “Sikh Atheist”). Such comments often prompt replies suggesting that the fault lies with their parents not truly understanding Sikhi. There are also self-proclaimed Sikh atheists and agnostics who, like Khushwant Singh, explain that they have kept long hair and a turban despite their doubts, because Sikhi is an important part of their overall identity. One doubtful young man, who wore a turban, but then cut his hair, asked on a sikhnet.com discussion forum whether people thought he should follow Sikhism, “but without the divinity.” He was concerned that wearing a turban while still questioning the existence of God would go against Guru Nanak’s teaching to be true to oneself (www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=3752). While the responses he received from other commenters on the thread were generally dismissive of the possibility of being a non-believing Sikh, it is worth noting that he sought to maintain some components of his Sikh identity even though he was, like Khushwant Singh, an agnostic.

Sikh women, too, have written about the complex interplay between “religion” and “culture” with respect to keeping uncut hair. Jasveen Kaur Sarna, for example, mentions going through a phase of questioning her faith, but being sure that she would not cut her hair. She wrote (Sarna 2017),

For me keeping my hair is firstly out of my dedication to the Sikh religion, but even when I went through my own phase of coming to terms with religion I never once considered cutting my hair, and that was because even if I wasn’t sure about the faith aspect of my tradition, it was the cultural heritage that mattered to me more.

A young woman who describes herself as the daughter of a Sikh priest, and a “Sikh turned atheist female,” explained that she became an atheist because although religion may seem good in theory, “it’s human nature to manipulate the goodness to support their [i.e., religious leaders’] own agenda.” She noted that while Sikhs are taught that humans are equal, including with respect to gender and caste, there are unfair rules for women, and that most Sikhs condemn intercaste marriages. This young woman also explained that she still held some Sikh values, such as open-mindedness, generosity, and intellectual curiosity, but “found the idea of a ‘God’ just very off-putting” (www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/3smrl6/sikh_turned_atheist_female_here/).

Highlighting the apparent rise of Sikh teens declaring themselves atheists, a 2017 video by Satpal Singh of the UK-based charity Nanak Naam provides suggestions for worried parents, arguing that there must be new, non-dogmatic ways of teaching Sikhi to young people, taking their questions seriously, and advocating new, more abstract ways of talking about the concept of God, and also placing more emphasis on meditation. Interestingly, Bhai Satpal Singh suggests telling teens that it does not matter whether they believe in God or not, with the view that they will at some point recognize that it is the Guru who will make them happy in life (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc8Z75m-tbw&t=357s). The argument here seems to be that the overall cultural pull of Sikhi will sustain young people through periods of doubt, and that their doubts will eventually dissipate.

Others focus on rationalism and freethought, arguing that there is harmony between Sikhi and science and challenging what they see as superstitious assertions about the effects of Sikh practice. Ramjit Singh Mann, a retired medical laboratory scientist, wrote the article “A Rationalist’s View of Ardas” in 2018 in response to the assertion that a Canadian Sikh community’s recitation of prayers had prevented the rainstorm that was forecast for the day *nagar kirtan* was scheduled. Mr. Mann argued that the Sikh gurus taught that everything in the cosmos is governed by natural laws, or *hukam*, and that therefore the recitation of ardas could not contravene such laws. He further posed a long list of questions, asking why, for example, if indeed reciting ardas could alter nature’s laws, the Gurus had not used it to alleviate human suffering, or why Sikhs were unable to use it to stop the carnage of partition in 1947 or the Indian army’s attack on the Golden Temple in 1984. He distinguishes between what he understands to be the core teachings of the Gurus and their distortion by Sikh religious leaders and institutions (www.sikhnet.com/news/rationalist’s-view-ardas). A young Canadian Sikh man takes a similar tack; he asserts that Sikhism and atheism are not mutually exclusive because Sikhism is “a logical, rational, and scientific religion as far as religions go.” He came to this view on the basis of his reading of New Atheist Richard Dawkins. “To worship the greatness of the Universe and accept its inherent order in a rational manner is to be a Sikh” (www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=943). The American Humanist Association has a page on its website titled “Humanist Common Ground: Sikhism,” which makes a similar argument (<https://americanhumanist.org/paths/sikhism/>). As these examples show, a common theme for those who describe themselves as Sikh humanists, rationalists, or agnostics is the notion that there is much of value in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, and that Sikhism is rational at its core. They see the institution of religion – particularly its leaders and the institutions they support – as overshadowing what is valuable with politics, greed, and meaningless ritual.

Many of those online who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic cultural Sikhs echo Bhagat Singh and Khushwant Singh in their praise of some aspects of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh. They frequently cite Guru Nanak’s denunciation of wasteful rituals and Guru Gobind Singh’s stance against tyranny as expressed, for example, in *Zafarnama*, the Guru’s letter to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. It is not uncommon to find assertions to the effect that while Sikhism has many of the same problems as other religions, it is

nonetheless the best among them because of its views on the equality of male and female, or as one self-described atheist Sikh from the Punjab tweeted, “Sikhs are better than other people” (lovely___Devil@lovelyD24716912 May 24).

While most of the examples of Sikh irreligiosity, one finds online may give the impression that it is a phenomenon most common among urban, English-speaking Sikhs, especially in the diaspora, it is important to note that there are such discussions catering to Sikhs and Hindus in rural Punjab as well. The Tarksheel Society presents programs and sponsors fairs in Punjab villages in which they demonstrate how magic tricks are done and investigate claims of paranormal activity and rebirth. They seek also to stimulate discussion about belief in God (<https://tarksheel.org/index.php/about-us>), suggesting that they see everyday superstitious practices as not only irrational but interfering with the capacity to develop the critical thinking skills needed to analyze more abstract theological assertions as well. The Tarksheel website, mainly in Punjabi, publicizes the group’s many books and links to videos debunking supernatural claims.

Whatever terms people use to describe themselves, the boundary between the religious and the irreligious Sikh is not as sharply drawn as our models for understanding religion might suggest. Bhagat Singh and Khushwant Singh could proclaim their atheism and agnosticism while still deeply respecting the ethical stance of the Sikh Gurus. Similarly, many other Sikh atheists and agnostics conclude that while they find no evidence for God’s existence, Sikh history and literature remain meaningful and important to them. The adoption of terms such as “atheist” and “agnostic” by Sikhs who question the existence of God does not do full justice to the richness and variety of their views. The fact that there are those who believe that there is room within Sikhi for the “cultural Sikh,” and even the “atheist Sikh,” illuminates the inadequacy of the term “religion,” as defined primarily by belief, and by extension the terms that relate to rejecting it. Exploring these critiques of Sikhism sheds light on understandings of both internal and external boundaries and uncovers practices and beliefs that are contentious, disputed, and also the source of doubts even for those who are deeply committed to Sikhi, such as the power of prayer and the persistence of caste. It shows, too, that the border between “religion” and “culture” is porous and shifting, for both religious and irreligious Sikhs choose to relegate practices they reject to the category of “culture,” even if others might consider those practices religious.

Examining the questions raised by those who reject religion can serve as a reminder that religious identity and practice, like virtually every other form of identity, is in large part socially constructed and variable over time. Many go through phases of doubt and questioning. While for some this leads to greater faith, for others, it leads to the quest to craft some sort of identity as an irreligious Sikh. The social media discussions of irreligiosity are a potent reminder of the fact that people make a range of accommodations and selections with regard to particular beliefs and practices. In illuminating this process of doubt and questioning, these contemporary videos, blogs, and comments sections show us a broader spectrum of lived religious experience, including that end of the spectrum where religious itself is challenged and rejected in part or in its entirety.

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PART IX

Media



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SIKHS AND CINEMA

Kumool Abbi

The evolution of Sikh identity, specifically in the twentieth century, demonstrates the social, cultural, and political growth and evolution of this fairly young, evolving, and dynamic religion. The representation of this identity became very prominent visually in terms of Internet sites and other forms of social media. Cinema followed later.

The representation of Sikhs in cinema has also followed an interesting parallel with the growing visual presence of the Sikh community across the world; its economic and cultural assertiveness has spread to diverse geographical spaces. A religion of numerical minority whose presence in the cinematic world is linked to a parallel domination and assertion of a distinct identity provides a very unique sociological process and phenomena.

Hollywood: The Arrival of the Sikh Visible Presence

In mainstream Hollywood, Sikh visibility began with the James Bond film *Octopussy* (1981), where the Indian Actor Kabir Bedi played the role of Gobinda, the villain opposing Roger Moore's James Bond. This was followed by the film *The English Patient* (1996), based on a novel by Michael Ondaatje (1993). The film won a great deal of critical acclaim, 12 nominations at the Oscars, five BAFTA awards, and two Golden Globes. The film features Naveen Andrews in the role of a Sikh named Sapper Kip, recruited by the British Army as a bomb disposal officer. He falls in love with the nurse Hana, only to leave after a while for his next assignment promising to meet her soon. The film played an important role in creating an assertive visible presence. *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), a superhero film starring Sean Connery, featured Indian actor Nasseerudin Shah playing a Sikh character – an Indian pirate and techno genius named Captain Nemo. Art Malik played the role of Singh, a manservant of the estranged father, Sir John Talbot (Anthony Hopkins), in the supernatural horror film *Wolfman* (2010). A glimpse into the Sikh worldview, its family life, migrant worlds, cultural conflicts, and encounters of class and race discrimination, has been shown by British Sikh filmmaker Gurinder Chadha in the film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). The film “centers on the young Sikh girl played by Parminder Nagra who wants to attain success as a female footballer, but falls in love with her white coach played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers” (Mandair 2013: 189). The film hosts reflections of her own life as

Chaddha's own father also went through successive slights as an immigrant living in Britain and they did not go unnoticed by his daughter. Before buying his shop, he had tried to get a job in Barclays Bank where he was told he could not be hired because he wore a turban. Another story about how he had wanted to play cricket but was ostracised by British players found its way into the most popular film to date the phrase making *Bend It Like Beckham*.

(*The Guardian* 2004)

The film achieved "critical and commercial success," breaking box office records in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, and South Africa. Made at an initial cost of \$4.4 million, *Bend It Like Beckham* grossed over \$76 million (Newsweek.com 3/10/17) and won awards at the Locarno, Sydney, and Toronto film festivals. Chaddha explored the cultural lives of British migrant communities further with other films like *Bhaji on the Beach* (1999) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). Her latest film *Blinded by Light* (2019) sets itself in 1980s England and is based on the life of a Pakistani migrant, Javed (Vivek Kalra), who is drawn by the pull of Bruce Springsteen's music. His best friend, a Sikh boy named Roops (Aaron Phagura), introduces him to Bruce Springsteen.

However, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, "the centrality of religion and race to the fabric of the American public sphere and its dangerous implication for highly visible minorities such as the Sikhs became evident" (Mandair 2013: 197). This became even clearer "when the Sikhs were confused with Muslims or Arabs in North America and became targets of hate crime perpetuated by the host communities misguided by an all-pervasive news media" (Mandair 2013: 206) and "[Sikhs] experienced what can be defined as an 'Islamophobic backlash'" (Johal and Singh 2019: i). This complex identity conflict sought to be represented and articulated by the mainstream cinema on the one hand while also drawing a response from the community itself to redefine and showcase themselves. This struggle to claim the public sphere began to give a visibility and separate identity to the Sikhs – a marginalized but distinctive minority in the Western world.

It is this focus that is articulated in many mainstream films. Spike Lee's bank heist thriller *Inside Man* (2006) featured designer and actor Warriss Ahluwalia in the role of a New York bank clerk, Vikram Walia. A very prominent scene in the film is where he is socially profiled by the police and he sits before them, demanding his turban, which has been knocked off:

Wikram Walia: Fucking tired of this shit. What happened to my fucking civil rights? Why can't I go anywhere without being harassed? Get thrown out of a bank, I am a hostage. I get harassed, I go to the airport. I can't go through security without a random selection. Fucking random my ass.

Detective Keith Frazer: I bet you can get a cab though

Vikram Walia: Detective Frazer my ass, where's my fucking turban? I am not talking to anybody without my turban. It's a part of my religion to cover my head with respect to God. I am a Sikh, I am a Sikh . . . I need my turban, it is a part of my religion . . . no, no, I want my turban now.

Warriss Ahluwalia is being credited for having "made a big impact for all travelers who wear cultural garb and have had difficulty at airport security" (Chantilly Post 2016). He has also played a Sikh character in films like *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and *Darjeeling Limited* (2007), among others.

Ahluwalia referred to a discussion with a writer on always wearing a turban.

“Oh that’s amazing. You always wear the turban and beard in all your films?” I said “yes.” She was like, “that must be limiting.” I said “I am not actually limited, you’re limited. Your perception is limited, mine’s not because I can do anything I want to, and I have done that and proven that.”

(Rumnique Nannar 2015)

In a similar vein, another significant film is Isabel Coixets’ *Learning to Drive* (2014), starring the famous actor Ben Kingsley playing a New York cab driver Darwan Singh. He encounters the breakup of Wendy (Patricia Clarkson), a successful book critic, with her husband, Ted (Jake Weber). Wendy and Darwan gradually begin to interact, and she begins driving lessons with him. The encounter between the two is culturally enriching and ultimately empowering for Wendy.

Elucidating his performance, Kingsley felt that

it is very important to understand Darwan’s stillness and dignity in the context of a pretty well steady flow of abuse. I hope the film may allow audiences to look at the next Sikh they see on the street or in the supermarket slightly differently. There is something so noble, generous and compassionate about wonderful Darwan Singh. The specificity of being a Sikh and that silhouette is extraordinary. It’s instantly recognizable. It has been confused for all sorts of, you know, ridiculous and tragic reasons.

(Firstpost.com 2015)

A similar consideration guided Indian actor Dev Patel, who plays the role of a Sikh in *Mumbai Hotel* (2018), a film by Anthony Maras on the November 26th attacks in Mumbai. Patel prepared hard for his role and wanted to play the part of a Sikh character.

Post 9/11 there were many stories of cab drivers being abused. There is a genuine need for a better representation of the community . . . These are things I held on to imbibe this part. It’s a selfless and incredible community. In their Gurudwara it read “my turban, my pride.” It became one of the speeches in the film.

(*Times of India* 2019)

Tiger (2018), an American sports drama directed by Alister Grierson, written by Michael Pugliese and Prem Singh and produced by Daniel Grodnik, also touched a multiplicity of issues. It is based on the story of former Ontario boxing champion Pradeep Nagra, who faced roadblocks in achieving success due to his refusal to shave his beard. Further International collaborations with directors of Indian origin are a step in the search for global audiences and widespread distribution of films with more cultural and regional specific themes. Such directors include Deepa Mehta with the film *Beeba Boys* (2015) (based on the gang culture in Canada) and Kavi Raz with the film *The Black Prince* (2017).

The Black Prince centers on a brief history of Sikh rule under Maharaja Ranjit Singh and ascension to the throne of a five year old Duleep Singh. Duleep was sent to England under the care of Dr. John Login. As Duleep begins his sojourn in England, he becomes close to Queen Victoria, converts to Christianity, and begins a life under the umbrella of the British aristocracy. However, as he reconnects with his mother, Rani Jindan, after a gap of almost 13 years, she makes him realize his true calling: fighting to win freedom for his people against British rule. A deliberate play between the past and the present is explained by its director Kavi Vaz, who feels that making a film on Duleep

Singh comes “down to the belated interest in Sikh ancestry and the quest for identity through history” (Indian Express 2017). Placing *The Black Prince* in a contemporary framework,

the Khalistani separatist movement may have fuelled the fire and aroused interest in the mighty kingdom of Punjab or the Khalsa Raj. It was the last stronghold against the encroaching British empire and it was stolen from the Sikhs by the political manoeuvre of divide and rule.

(Indian Express 2017)

Jagmohan Singh, *World Sikh News* editor, in an open letter to Jasjeet Singh, the producer of *The Black Prince*, felt that the film was really “the Sikh movie of the century” as it had attempted to rectify “the decades of misinformation and disinformation about the Sikhs.” Putting it in a historical context, he states, “After the eclipse of the Sikh empire in 1849, after nearly a century and a half, by producing this movie you have enabled the whole Sikh community to retrieve their honour and past.” He further elaborates,

The Black Prince needs to enter the veins of the Sikhs. It needs to enter every Sikh household. The first all Sikh treat from Hollywood, the first full feature Hollywood film on a Sikh theme . . . needs to become the first movie in a revolution which will take the perception of Sikhs to new heights.

(Worldsikhnews.com 2017)

The gradual and routine acceptance of Sikhs universally is being seen in the latest Disney Pixar trailer *Turning Red* (2022), which introduces a turbaned Sikh character. The story centers on a 13 year-old girl, Mei Mei, who turns into a red giant panda whenever she feels stressed. The turbaned Sikh character introduced is her school security guard, who is wearing a *kada* (iron bangle) and a uniform adorned with a navy-blue turban (*Times of India* 2021).

Another interesting controversy relates to the presence of a Sikh in the Hollywood film *1917* (2019). Sepoy Jondalar, played by Nabhaan Rizwan, elicited strong comments from actor Lawrence Fox, who said,

It is a very heightened awareness of the colour of someone’s skin because of the oddness of the casting. Even in *1917* they have done it with a Sikh soldier. Which is great, it’s brilliant, but you are suddenly aware there were Sikhs fighting in this war. And you’re like “ok” you’re now diverting away from what the story is . . . there is something institutionally racist about forcing diversity on people in that way.

(BBC 2020)

After his remarks generated public outrage and the contribution of Sikhs was highlighted, he apologized to the Sikh community for his “clumsy” comments (LozzaFox @LozzaFox 2020).

After 9/11, Sikhs being confused with Arabs led to a great deal of hate crime against them. References are also fleetingly made in some films.

In Mira Nair’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012) a character refers to Balbir Singh Sodhi’s murder in Arizona, whilst another responds by saying “it’s really bad for the Sikhs” and “any beard and turban is a target.” In *Imperium* (2016) Daniel Radcliffe, who plays an undercover

FBI agent tasked with infiltrating white supremacists, is briefed on (amongst others) Wade Michael Page, the Neo Nazi responsible for the Wisconsin Oak Creek Sikh Massacre.

(*The Spectator* 2021)

This profiling also generated a creative response from the community. Specifically in North America, the Sikhs began to invest in low-budget film projects intending to make films that presented the Sikh community to other ethnic groups in order to dispel incorrect stereotypes and highlight the dilemmas faced by the community. These included documentaries such as *Mistaken Identities: Discovering Sikh Identities* (2001) by Vinanti Sarkar, *Divided We Fall* (2004) by Valerie Kaur Brar, *Continuous Journey* (2004) by Ali Kazmi, *Roots in The Sands* (1998) by Jayasri Hart, and *Ocean of Pearls* (2010) by Sarab Neelam. All of these highlight the problem of wearing a turban in the diaspora (Mandair 2013: 207).

Sikhs in Bollywood: A Search for Authentic Representation

The visual representation of Sikhs in Hindi cinema too has undergone many changes in the last few decades. This can be exemplified visually through the different examples of film posters of *Shaheed-E-Azam Bhagat Singh* over the years. While films relating to historical and contemporary issues such as the struggle for freedom or freedom fighters have been made, the Sikh identity has not been very clearly defined visually in the early years of Hindi cinema. Sikhs have remained marginally visible within the overall arc of Punjabi Hindu traditions, with some distinct qualities highlighted that later became standardized and continue today. Their cinematic portrayal emphasizes semiotic archetypal qualities of Sikhs. These imply certain elements of physical strength and masculinity, as well as cultural traits like valor, devotion, sacrifice, blazing purity, courage, lack of guile or stealth, dignity, honor, self-respect, lack of lust, etc. The Sikh therefore follows a certain set of emerging values: respect and protection towards women, lack of violence, hard work, charity, and a sense of virtue and belief in the spirit of humanity. More significantly, the Sikhs characteristically glorify their faith to subsume themselves for a larger cause selflessly. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for their country, religion, and community.

Many of the songs composed about important Sikh characters highlight these specific traits. As the girl in love with Bhagat Singh in *Shaheed-E-Azam Bhagat Singh* (1965) croons: “*jogi jogi hum to lut gaye tere pyar mein, jaane tujh ko khabar kab ho gi, hum to tujh ko dil de baithe per teri lagan paraiye*” (listen you ascetic, I have given you my heart, but when will you come to know you are fascinated with something else). Similarly, a popular song from the famous film *Kesari* (2019) picks a track with a similar theme, “*teri mitti vich mil jaavan bas itni si aarzo*” (I want to become a part of our earth, that is my only aspiration). It is the collective embodiment of these characteristics that created the myth of the Sikhs as the sword arm of the nation. Powerful figures who upheld the values of integrity and protected the nascent nation. Here, they began to be represented as figures of legitimate reassurance. Army men, policemen, truck drivers, taxi drivers elderly statesmen, all upholding the authority of the state.

Most significantly the Sikh character does not have an agenda to proselytize. He occupies a cultural space where he is interacting harmoniously with other communities. The Sikh character has no discomfort with other communities, rather, he is secure in his integrated anthropological and cultural world. While their exterior front presents a boisterous simplicity – straightforwardness and humor on the surface – their inner, existential world makes them resolute, emboldened by the pain and suffering of Partition, having their “never say die” spirit zestfully inspire others to endure.

Compared to frivolous or flippant characters, the Sikh characters are shown to struggle with daunting circumstances. They overcome obstacles with faith: perseverance and endurance, resolute and undaunted.

It is this complexity of Sikh characteristics that at times created repetitive stereotypes and caricatures bordering on the exaggerated and ridiculous. Being particularly lampooned before the stronger “other” reflected in cameos of Hindi cinema (Jhatpat Singh in *Pyar ka Mausam* (1968) and Makhan Singh in *Evening In Paris* (1967)) reinforces their stereotypes in character roles.

Two important strong Sikh characters have been played out by Prem Nath as Himmat Singh in *Roti Kapda Aur Makan* (1974), who aids Bharat (Manoj Kumar) in rescuing the poor girl Tulsi (Mousmi Chatterjee) from the goons and eventually helps him in his struggles against the villain, Nekiram (Madan Puri). Meanwhile, Shammi Kapoor plays a prominent role as Shamsheer Singh in *Desh Premee* (1982). The film focuses on residents of Bharat Nagar in the film, divided into Punjabi, Bengali Madras, and Muslim sections and presided over by their own leaders, Puttu Anna (Premnath), Paruntho Ghosh (uttam Kumar), Ghulam Ali (Parikrishat Sahni), and Shamsheer Singh (Shammi Kapoor).

The Sikh disguise has been an important staple for many heroes who fought villains as their “other” Sikh self or in Bhangra sequences preparing for the climax. This masquerade has even been used by heroines like Hema Malini in *Johnny Mera Naam* (1972) and more lately by Rani Mukherjee in *Dil Bole hadippa* (2009), where she disguises herself as a young Sikh cricketer.

The veneration of a Sikh as the ultimate patriotic soldier coincided with the fiftieth year celebration of the Indian Air Force, with Govind Nihalani’s film *Vijeta* (1982), a coming-of-age film, with a Sikh character, Angad Singh (Kunal Kapoor), playing a pivotal role. An important Sikh character has also been played by Dharmendra in *Jeevan Mritya* (1970), where he disguises himself as a Sikh to take revenge after being cheated and deprived of his love and job. Though Dharmendra proudly upheld his distinct Jat Sikh status in contrast to the largely Punjabi Hindu mainstream heroes. It is in *Pratigya* (1975) that his typical Jat Sikh traits emerge though he visibly remains clean shaven: “*main jat yamla pagla deewana ho rabba, itni si baat na jaana ki oh mainu pyar kardi hai, saade utte oh mard hai*” (I am a crazy Jat and did not realize that she loves me).

However, it was Dharmendra’s actor son, Sunny Deol, who began the process of reintegrating Sikhs in the mainstream after their alienation due to the Operation Bluestar and The Delhi Riots. Performing his iconic visible Sikh patriotic roles as Brigadier Kuldip Chandpuri in *Border* (1996) and as the truck driver Tara Singh in *Gadar* (2001). The declining phase of terrorism in Punjab also coincided with the emergence of humorist and satirist Jaspal Bhatti, who first came into the spotlight on Jalandhar Doordarshan with the popular two-minute *rang ch bhang* (a little interruption). This was followed by his iconic shows: *Flop Show*, *Ulta Pulta*, and *Full Tension*, among others. The turbaned sociopolitical satirist, in the post-terrorism era, made the transition to character roles in Hindi films. As the first turbaned Sikh to play himself, he brought crackling humor, punches, and joy to the audiences. However, due to the thin line between humor, satire, and comedy, the content of the cameo became crasser when second-rung actors began playing Sikh roles (e.g., Johnny Lever in *Raja Hindustani* (1996) and *Paying Guest* (2009) or Arshad Warsi in *Double Dhamaal* (2011)).

Jaspal Bhatti acted in a significant number of Hindi films, beginning with *Samrajya* (1999), where he played a Sikh character in love and always encountering failure. This was followed by Rishi Kapoor’s *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* (1999), where he played the role of Iqbal Singh, a patriotic Indian residing in New York with his typical humor. Other films were *Janam Samjha Karo* (1999) and *Tujhe Meri Kasam* (2003), with Salman Khan; *Fana* (2006) starring Aamir Khan, Sanjay’s *Khauf* (2000) and *Kartoos* (2000), both starring Sanjay Dutt; *Koi Mere Dil Se Puche* (2002), *Kuch Meetha Ho Jaaye* (2005), where he plays a Brahmin character called Dube; and *Mera Dil Aapke Paas Hai* (2000)

with Anil Kapoor and Aishwarya Rai. Though often considered India's Woody Allen, Jaspal Bhatti's wife and fellow artist, Savita Bhatti, evaluated his contribution to the Hindi films by hinting at the typecasting biases of the industry. "Alas no director thought of casting Jaspal Ji in any other role other than comedy. No one wanted to invest in a character actor" (Cinestan.com 2016). So instead of his talent being attenuated he was "used more like a spare wheel by the Hindi film industry" (Cinestan.com 2016). It was his Punjabi film *Mahaul Theek Hai* (1999) that prepared the ground for the audiences to return to the theaters in Punjab. Another Sikh face who needs to be mentioned, though belonging to a different genre, is the popular Punjabi singer Daler Mehndi, who burst on the Hindi film scene with the popular film *Mrityudand* (1997) co-starring with Amitabh Bacchan. In his chartbusting song, he sings, "*saade naal raho ge taan aish karo ge zindagi de saare maze cash karo ge*" (if you live with us you would have fun, you will cash in on all the fun of life).

Analyzing the journey of Sikh actors, film critic Firoz Rangoonwala felt that

the Sikh earlier was consigned to character roles. It was assumed that turbaned Sikh with a beard did not have a pan Indian mass appeal. Also they were viewed as representatives of a particular community with a distinct style of speaking . . . at best, a sardar played a good friend to the hero or was relegated to being a side character/comedian.

(Asiavilla 2019)

A number of scholars have pointed to the emergence of Punjabiyaat as an element in the last few decades among others (Ayers 2008; Kabir 2004; Gera Roy 2012). To a large extent this articulation of Panjabiyaat has been appropriated by Bollywood. Das (2006) emphasizes that this "Panjabiyaat is being positively embodied, almost entirely by Hindu Khatri Panjabis." For Das, "cinematic Panjabiyaat is marked either by near total invisibility or the caricaturing and/or demonizing of the Panjabi other, the Panjabi Sikh and the Muslim" (Das 2006: 454, 461–464). It is in this expanded space represented by a new Punjabiyaat that filmmakers like Manmohan Singh, the current forerunner of Punjabi cinema, have sought to exploit and place Punjabi language filmmaking on a firm, culturally distinct, and stable footing.

Gera Roy points to a recent emerging trend where "Mumbai filmmakers have been forced to genuflect to the rising economic and political power of the Sikh diaspora through the integration foregrounding of the Sikh subject." This trend could be attributed to many factors:

the rising power of the Sikh diaspora, the transnational mobilization of Sikh identity, and the increased visibility of Sikhs in prominent positions has compelled a revision of the Sikh in the national imagery. It is significant that the moment of ethnic representation spawns new forms of representation

(Roy 2014: 207).

The film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) "reversed the older stereotype of the Panjabi in Hindi cinema." It also "constructed" the "panjabi pastoral through which Panjabiyaat has come to be valorized as the source of authenticity in the films that followed" (Roy 2014: 207).

Popular singer and actor Amarinder Gill, too, explains in a similar vein: "The turban has its universal appeal as you can now find a turbaned Sikh in every nook and corner of this world. So it is an attempt by Bollywood film producers to gain the attention of viewers worldwide" (*Economic Times* 2019). The popular films and heroes who played Sikh protagonists were Sunny Deol in *Border* (1997), *Gadar* (2001), *Jo Bole So Nihal* (2005), *Yamla Pagla Deewana* 1 and 2 (2011, 2013), and *Singh Saab the Great* (2013), Ajay Devgan in *Son of Sardar* (2012), Farhan Akhtar in

Bhag Milkha Bhag (2012), Rishi Kapoor in *Patiala House* (2011), Rishi Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan in *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), Ranbir Kapoor in *Rocket Singh Salesman of the Year* (2009), Akshay Kumar in *Singh Is King* (2008), Akshay Kumar in *Kesari* (2019), and Anil Kapoor and Arjun Kapoor in *Mubarkan* (2017) (Abbi 2019: 23–24). As Vishwanathan has put it, while these protagonists have “broken the stereotypes of playing non-military characters” (c.f. Roy 2014: 213) and also “accomplished” the “challenging objective of reinscribing the keshdhari body as the body of desire” (Roy 2014: 215).

A general criticism is that these Bollywood representations “play on the stereotyped articulation of the Sikhs to rusticity and hypermasculinity to transform the Sikh into an object of the nation’s desire” (Roy 2014: 204). While at the same time these constructions show “how the Sikh subject is permanently bound and dislocated within Indian constructions of citizenship and nation” and is “subjected to the nationalist narrative rather than take a different route” (Mooney 2008: 44–45; c.f. Roy 2014: 213). For Mehta, Bollywood filmmakers have created a “bricolage where Sikh identities and practices are jumbled up or deliberately misrepresented” (Mehta 2013: 78). Tending to miss out the Sikh representations that “have been brutalized by the nation” (Harleen Singh 2006: 116). Bollywood cinema has seen the articulation of the construction of nationhood and identities. This articulation has been instrumental in creating the Hindu-Muslim concepts of nationhood and later, in the othering of Muslims with the creation of terrorist stereotypes. However, the visible presence of Sikhs has remained on the margins only occupying the center space of a Sikh hero in contemporary times.

Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra’s coming of age films *Rang de Basanti* (2006) and *Bhag Milkha Bhag* (2013), based on the life of the flying Sikh, were path-breaking films as they represented a synergy and harmony with the triad of Sikh identity, visual depiction, and the national discourse. For Ran-goonwala, it was *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009) that broke the “myth of the brave warrior or uncouth rustic dichotomy” with Harpreet Singh the “first working working class non jacked Sikh protagonist.” A mediocre person who talks about the lives of the bottom, who gets less than 40% marks, and essays this successful journey in the world of business, through grit, hard work, and honesty (Asiaville.in 2019).

A further development in the articulation of cinematic Sikh presence in Bollywood has taken place with the arrival of the Punjabi singer and superstar Diljit Dosanjh. Who is gaining popularity for playing an authentic and real Sikh character – a first step for Bollywood. The clear assertion and projection of Sikh identity is an inseparable part of his films like *Udta Panjab* (2016), *Phillauri* (2017), *Welcome to New York* (2018), *Soorma* (2018), *Arjun Patiala* (2019), *Good Newz* (2019), and *Sooraj pe mangal Bhari* (2020), among others that are under production. Dosanjh explains his position:

I know I am a turbaned sardar, I can only play sardar roles. Either that or a producer should be willing to alter the script to accommodate my physical appearance. But I won’t call this a restriction. It is my good fortune that I am the first Sikh to be playing a leading role in Bollywood films.

(*Deccan Chronicle* 2020)

Sandeep Goyal, a marketing professional, analyzed him with a different benchmark, “Dosanjh with 4.4 million Twitter followers and 10.8 million on Instagram, has continued to climb rapidly on ‘likeability’ a very important force multiplier for human brands. And that is what makes him special.”

Giving details of the Tiara research conducted in the beginning of the year, “Dosanjh scored very high on rugged and energetic; gave him high ratings on sexy, charming, heartthrob, loved by all

and likeable: and not surprisingly rated him above average on distinctive, trendy and cool” (Business Standard 2020). As put by another turbaned actor, Jassi Gill,

I thank Diljit for proving that a normal sardar guy can play diverse roles and have a massive reach. Before this, Sardars were only shown as comedians. People who played Sardars used to wear fake turbans and Punjabis always felt this is not how a Punjabi guy would be. Diljit came and changed that perception.

(*The Tribune* 2018)

Talking about his struggle with bagging roles, the turban-wearing actor Manjot Singh, who gained popularity with *Oye Lucky Oye* (2008), *Fukrey* (2013), and *Fukrey Returns* (2017), says,

After *Fukrey*, despite it being a hit, I realised that it’s not that easy to bag a film as I wasn’t offered much. Whenever I met casting directors, they came back to me with a comedy role. Initially, I was fine with it, and used to tell them to let me know if something else comes up. But it became a pattern. Just because I am a sardar doesn’t mean I am funny all the time.

(*Hindustan Times* 2019)

Despite making hit films, he was outrightly rejected for roles:

Recently, I went to a casting agency because I wanted them to manage my work. So, they took my portfolio. After a few days, they reverted saying that “since you are a sardar, it is quite difficult for us to search for a role for you.”

However he feels the winds of change in projecting “stereotypes” (*Hindustan Times* 2019). It is

for instance Diljit Paaji who is opening the doors with films like *Uda Punjab* and *Phillauri*. People loved him everywhere. So I know, even I will get my share of opportunity and no, I did not think of cutting my hair or removing my turban for a role.

(*Indian Express* 2017)

Puneet Issar takes a directorial venture in *I Am Singh*, attempting to project the Sikhs in proper light by setting out with

a two-point agenda. First and foremost is to tell the world that Sikhs are a distinct race, not to be confused with any other race, as had happened post-9/11. Secondly, to undo the damage, which he feels many Bollywood directors have done to the glory of Sikhs.

He strongly feels that “Sikhs are such a unique race. Singh is one who stands against injustice. yet look at the way Bollywood has treated the *qaum*, made a mockery out of them” (*The Tribune* 2011). Popular Punjabi actor Gippy Grewal, who plays a sardar in *Lucknow Central* (2017) starring Farhan Akhtar, feels that “sardarji” characters are misrepresented in Bollywood “due to a lack of insight and knowledge about our community, culture and contribution to our country.” He quips further, “I think just putting a turban on the head and changing the language from Hindi to Punjabi does not make one a Punjabi. *Punjabi dil hona chahida hai* (you need the heart of a Punjabi)” (*Business Standard* 2017). Singer Jasbir Jassi has a caveat for Bollywood producers who he feels “should be cautious about the dignity of the turban while portraying it on screen” (*Economic Times* 2009).

The visible projection of Sikh identities manifests its importance to the Sikh community, as well as its seat of religious power, in the form of the proactive role of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). The religious body is very particular in asserting that the Sikhs projected specifically in Bollywood films adhere to the strict norms, rules, regulations, and customs laid down by the “*rehat maryada*” (code of conduct). This is important in terms of the characters in films, the representation of the symbols of Sikhism, and how the Sikh characters are treated in the film. The emphasis on the purity, correctness of physical form, and the power of censorship in its hands at protesting the wrong projection of Sikh identities cinematically gives a unique role to the Sikh religious body at the highest level. Controversies were generated by many films the most prominent being *Jo Bole So Nihal* (2005), *Singh Is King* (2008), *Son of Sardar* (2012), *Singh Sahib the Great* (2013), *Singh Is Bling* (2015), *Flying Jat* (2015), and *Manmarziyan* (2018), among others. The SGPC’s dissent forced the film directors to edit the “controversial” scenes, keeping a regard for Sikh sentiments.

Another important aspect is the break in the carefully created “nationalist” narrative, which has taken place in a few films dealing with the issue of Operation Bluestar and the consequences of the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the form of the Delhi Riots as well as the spread of terrorism in Punjab. Though Hindi films have largely ignored these narratives, almost to the point of promoting erasure, some commercial films like the highly acclaimed *Machis* (1996), which was produced by RV pandit and directed by Gulzar, and *Hawayein* (2003), again produced and directed by Amitoj Mann, discuss this issue threadbare and look at the impact of these important events on the Sikhs and Punjab. Recently, a commercial film, *31st October* (2016), starring Vir Das and Soha Ali Khan on the Delhi riots was released. While three art films, *Ammu* (2004) and *Kaya Taran* (2004) and *Kush* (2013), among others, have highlighted this burning issue.

A very interesting aspect of Punjabi cinema, which will be discussed later, has been the rather careless disregard to visible symbols, which contrast with the emphasis on purity of form vis-à-vis Bollywood, despite the fact that Punjabi cinema has turned highly political in some of its articulation. While the film *Singh Is King* (2008) that “catapulted the turbaned Sikh to the national consciousness” was primarily criticized for the wrong way of tying the turban,

“Nevertheless,” argues film maker, Manmohan Singh, “The mainstream film with turbaned Sikh as the hero, played by no less than heartthrob Akshay Kumar has actually set the ball rolling. “In fact, he gives full marks to Bollywood for doing what even Punjabi cinema has failed to do. That is having cast a turbaned Sikh as the lead.”

(*The Tribune* 2011)

Concurring with him, filmmaker Sahib Singh says that “even Bollywood has begun to project the turbaned Sikh in recent times. In fact, Bollywood took the lead in making a Sikh hero more acceptable and universal” (*The Tribune* 2011).

However, playing the part of an authentic Sikh hero is not just about tying the turban, it requires a great deal of effort, determination, and mental prowess. One example is that of actor Randeep Hooda, who was chosen to play the lead role in a film in *The Battle of Saragarhi* (although unfortunately the film had to be shelved). He had grown his hair and beard, promising not to cut them until the film was shot. Regretting that the film could not be completed, he feels that “you learn to move on. Through the journey, I learnt the principles of Sikhism and I am a better person now” (Desimartini.com 2020). Explaining how “heartbroken” after his failed tryst with *The Battle of Saragarhi*, he elaborated,

I had taken a pledge in front of the Guru Granth Sahib in Golden Temple that I will not cut my hair till this movie reaches its conclusion. When I got offered this role in *Extraction*, I did this audition still hoping that Saragarhi goes on, but it was a very hard decision for me to take

off my hair. *Kesh Katana* (cutting hair). So I went to the Gurdwara here, and I apologised and I said, I have to work. You know, I have to keep working. I mean my job is such that it is a performing art. And if I don't perform, something inside me will die. And I apologised, I came home shaved my beard, with a very heavy heart, I just had to move on by putting an end to it. (Hindustan Times 2020)

Detailing his preparation for his role in the film *SAN 84 Justice* (2021), actor Ashish Sahdev says he

did things to imbibe the Sikh rituals and traditions to be a part of his life: I visited the Gurudwara regularly, did seva, washed utensils and cleaned them, sat with volunteers and understood the Sikh perspective and honour towards their faith. (Televisionworld.com 2020)

The main change that has taken place for documentary filmmaker Sahib Singh is that “that Sikh characters are being fleshed out with sensitivity and sensibility . . . Though Sikh characters have been an integral part of Hindi cinema, their projection as nuanced and subtle protagonists is a recent phenomenon” (*The Tribune* 2019). Popular Hindi Filmmaker Imtiaz Ali gave a detailed description of his characterization of a Sikh protagonist for his film *Love Aaj aur Kal*. Ali says he

based his casting on the experience of a Sikh friend in Jamshedpur who would be reluctant to go and watch a film. “He would say ‘what’s the point? It is not as if by watching films, I can get into the industry, Sardars don’t make it in films.’ That got me wondering why a sardar can’t be a hero? We should move beyond the cliché of chocolate heroes and look around our neighbourhood for real characters.”

(Economic Times 2009).

Explaining his reasons for creating a Sikh character the writer of the film *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009), Jaideep Sahni elaborated,

It has nothing to do with ethnicity. We were thinking of a story and that’s how a boy came to mind. Why should we follow a syllabus which says all protagonists should be *gora chitta* (fair skinned) north Indian Hindu male.

(New Indian Express 2009).

Discussing the character Robby in *Manmarziyan*, writer Kanika Dhillon feels she could “not think of anyone else but a Sikh to fit into the part.” She asserts, “We are living in exciting times of inclusivity where diversity has to be celebrated” (*The Tribune* 2019). Sahib Singh too endorses the point that Sikh characters should be shown by filmmakers “as real human beings. and not merely eulogise them as epitomes of bravery or religious crusaders” (*The Tribune* 2019). What is gradually taking place is the attempt, as Nonica Singh puts it, of a “conscious and discernible normalisation of Sikh characters seen and portrayed beyond stereotypes” (*The Tribune* 2019). Until this is achieved, Hindi cinema will continue with a tendency that “ends up othering the community.” What is required is to treat the Sikhs as “one of us” (Print.in 2020). On a positive note,

Bollywood has understood what Punjabi is all about and there is little chance of the clock turning back. So, in the future, Singh may or may not be king but Singh will certainly be Singh with due respect and honour.

(*The Tribune* 2019)

Punjabi Cinema: Multilayered Wheels Within Wheels

Punjabi cinema has gone through a different metamorphosis as compared to the visibility of Sikhs in the Hollywood and Bollywood Cinema with the emergence of the global Sikh middleclass. Though Punjabi cinema has had a parallel trajectory historically with Hindi cinema, it has undergone multiple locations, situations, shifts, and trying circumstances. As well as upheavals with phases of decline, revival, and reinvention. In the process it has become an important means to articulate diverse Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh identities created since the last century. While factors like region, religion, politics, caste, gender, local power dynamics, emerging diasporic identities crisscross different themes of Punjabi cinema. These have been further contextualized with the pre-Partition Punjab, Partition, PEPSU phase, reorganization in 1956 and creation of Punjab in its present form in 1966 after the Punjabi Suba movement, Green Revolution, the Militancy phase, post-Green Revolution Punjab, and emergence of transnational Sikh identities. The redrawing and remapping of borders are important endpoints to understand articulation of identities in Punjabi cinema. While the earlier phases showed a more submerged and less showcased Sikh presence. It was the 1969 film *Nanak Naam Jahaz Hai* that articulated Sikh religion, values, and lifeworld in a big way leading to a similar trend of Punjabi religious socials. However, all these phases have crystallized the Jat Sikh identity, which coincided with the celebration of the success of the Green Revolution. This was clearly articulated in the cinema of Gugu Gill, Yograj, Virender, and Gurdasman, who emerged as heroes reflecting the prosperity and well-being of Punjab. This was the dominant religious, cultural, and caste identity, which did not require any visible markers at that juncture for a long time. It was this carelessness of visible markers in Sikh identity, which distinguished Punjabi cinema from other types of cinema for a long time. The popular films of this genre were *Chann Pardesi* (1980), *Long da Lishkara* (1983), *Mamla Gagbad Hai* (1983), *Putt Jattan De*, *Jatt te Zameen* (1989), *Aanakh jattan De* (1990), among others.

After a phase of decline due to a number of factors, it was Harbhajan Mann's transnational migrant Jat Sikh hero which single-handedly revived and pulled out Punjabi cinema from the doldrums, creating new international markets with his popular film *Jee Aayan Nu* (2002). It was this nonresident Indian torn between his roots and diasporic identities that became the base for a number of popular films, *Asan nu mann Watna da* (2004), *Dil Aapna Punjabi* (2006), *Mitti Wajan Mardi* (2007), *Mera Pind* (2008), among others. Further, the emergence of transnational Sikh middle class also coincided with two important developments in Punjabi cinema. First it led to the revival of the memory and trauma of Operation Bluestar, the Delhi riots, and the consequent turmoil in Punjab. Leading to a creative outpouring of films like *Sadda Haq* (2013), *Punjab 1984* (2014), *Yodha* (2014), *Patta Patta Singhan da Vairi* (2015), etc. Secondly, it paved the way for the emergence of the international turbaned hero Diljit Dosanjh. He created a new trend in terms of the visibility of the Sikh hero in Punjabi cinema. The popular films of Dosanjh that broke records *Jatt and Juliet* (1 and 2) (2012 and 2013), *Sardarji* (1 and 2) (2015, 2–2016), *Ambarasariya* (2016), among others. The success of Diljit Dosanjh led to the popularity of mostly Jat Sikh turbaned heroes in Punjabi films. With a number of actors following the trend like Amy Virk, Tarsem Jassar, Ranjit Bawa, Amrinder Gill, and Sidhu Moosewala.

Exceptions have been reflected in the art cinema and small budget cinema with films like Surinder Singh's *Marhi Da Deewa* (1989), Gurvinder Singh's *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (2011) and *Chauthi Koot* (2015), *Adh Chanani Raat* (2022), and Anup Singh's *Qissa* (2013). As well as Rajeev Kumar's films like *Nabar* (2013), *Chamm* (2017), *Siri* (2020), dealing with the issues of the marginalized caste identities in recent times. Similarly the women's question too remains merged with the generally patriarchal male discourse with the exception of two mainstream films *ek kudi Punjab di* (2010), *Laung lachi* (2018), Anup Singh's *Qissa* (2013), and Rajeev Kumar's *Rakaans* (forthcoming).

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SIKH TELEVISION CHANNELS

Jasjit Singh

Introduction

Recent years have seen the establishment of numerous Sikh television channels, which are available through both traditional broadcast networks and online. While many of these channels are accessible via satellite and cable, several channels are also available internationally via online streaming platforms, including OTT (over the top) and IPTV (Internet protocol television). In the United Kingdom, the Sikh Channel, Sangat TV, Akaal Channel, and Khalsa Television (KTV) all broadcast via Sky satellite and online through YouTube. In India, the Fateh TV channel broadcasts via cable networks, including Fastway Cable, Den Cable, and Inn Cable and globally via cable platforms including Dish TV and Sling TV (ForbesIndia.com 2020) and online via its website, www.fatehtvonline.com. Several channels that broadcast live from various gurdwaras across the Punjab are exclusive to the Fastway network, including Nanaksar live, Anandpur live, Shaheedan live, Dukhniwaran, Ek-onkar TV, and Amrit Gurbani, as highlighted in the channel listings/packages available on the Fastway network (<https://fastway.in/pdf/SAF.pdf>).

In the United States, the TV84 channel broadcasts via cable networks, including Time Warner Cable (TV84.tv), while in Canada, the Sikh Channel is available via the Asian Television Network (ATN) (Newswire.ca 2013). In addition, many gurdwaras now have online live streaming channels, most commonly via Facebook and/or YouTube, as do several Sikh parcharaks (preachers). The number of these online channels has grown significantly, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. While several online channels broadcast Sikh-related content via YouTube and/or Facebook, including The Khalsa TV, Sikh Viewpoint, and SikhSiyasat based in Punjab, SikhVille based in Canada, and Basics of Sikhi, and Nanak Naam based in the United Kingdom, this analysis of Sikh television channels will focus on those channels broadcasting programs through satellite/cable and according to a programming schedule.

To date, there has been little examination of Sikh television channels, beyond Mandair's (2013) observation that the channels based in the United Kingdom are mainly conducted in Punjabi, cater for first-generation Sikh audiences, and have "either a predominantly Punjab-centric or Khalsa-centric focus that does not appear to interest second- and third-generation Sikhs whose language is primarily English." These channels are of interest for several reasons and represent an important development for Sikhs worldwide. As will be discussed, the presence of these channels has been

noted in the countries in which they have been established, often leading to regulatory issues. In this chapter, I examine the emergence of Sikh television channels and their impact on Sikhs worldwide, situating them in the wider literature about religious television, diasporic media, and ethnic media and suggesting directions for future research.

The Study of “Religious Television”

Academic studies of television have focused on issues of ownership, regulation, and on how audiences engage with content (Bignell 2012: 12). Much of the early scholarship on religious television was situated in communication studies and examined the growth and impact of televangelism (or “the electronic church”) in the United States. Scholars were mainly concerned with exploring how this emerging “electronic church” was impacting on existing church congregations (Abelman 1985) and on loyalty to religious institutions, as “switching television channels is a good bit easier than switching churches” (Wuthnow 1987). At the same time, scholars of marketing examined the organizational structures that led to the growth of televangelism in the 1980s, with Frankl (1987) highlighting the role of the entrepreneurs in charge of these electronic churches who were concerned with building their brands through marketing, rather than being religious leaders.

In terms of religious television audiences, Buddenbaum (1981) and Gaddy (1984) found these to be made up of older, blue-collar individuals who were generally poor, less educated, and likely to be affiliated to churches (Abelman 1985). These audience members would regularly participate in religious activities and were generally conservative in a wide range of religious beliefs, values, and attitudes (Gaddy and Pritchard 1985). Furthermore, Abelman (1987) found that in addition to *ritualistic* uses where audiences view television out of habit, and *instrumental* or goal-directed uses where audiences view television purposefully and for specific reasons (Rubin 1984), religious television audiences watch religious television for *reactionary* reasons, to avoid sexual and violent content found on secular television and to seek spiritual guidance. While there is little scholarship on Sikh television, research on Islamic television has highlighted its impact in fragmenting religious authority through the erosion of traditional authorities (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996), through democratizing religious public debate (Echchaibi 2011) and by individualizing Islamic belief (Schulz 2006). Kazi (2016) also found Islamic religious channels in Pakistan playing an important role in establishing the television careers of popular Islamic televangelists, many of whom represent conservative views on the role of women and religious minorities and who are mainly “concerned with demonstrating the superiority of Islam over other religions” (Biberman S Gul F Ocakli 2016).

South Asian and Punjabi Television

Writing about South Asian television channels, Dudrah observes how they have “filled a gap left by mainstream Western national broadcasters in serving the public needs of its minorities, while at the same time lining the pockets of its capital(ist) investors” (2002: 163). He further highlights how these channels facilitate access to the media industries for workers of South Asian descent, which would be difficult for them to access otherwise. Furthermore, Malik (2010) notes how diasporic television has become “a powerful mechanism for those sharing common cultural concerns, such as a religion, language or ethnicity, to defend their collective interests.”

Of relevance to the discussion of Sikh television channels are the Punjabi television channels established in India and elsewhere many of which include live broadcasts from gurdwaras and discussion programs on Sikh-focused topics in their programming. Channels based in India include PTC Punjabi, which holds the exclusive rights to the daily broadcast of live kirtan from Darbar Sahib

(PTC Networks) and Chardikala Time TV based in Patiala, Punjab, which broadcasts live from Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Delhi (Express News Service 2022) and which has also established studios in Canada (Vicnews.com 2021). In her examination of the structure of Punjabi television in India, Trehan notes how political ownership of television channels and the “dependence of distributors on the ruling party set the news agenda favouring the government, adversely affecting contrarian news diversity in the state” (2022: 186). In terms of content, in her study of the TV Punjab channel, Taneja (2018) found that “news stories with an element of sensationalism attracted maximum attention of the viewers, be it the case of crime or social stories.” In terms of viewership, Trehan (2022: 190) highlights how Punjabi viewers in the diaspora are “more inclined towards devotional programmes or religious content,” as senior citizens prefer to watch Gurbani and other religious broadcasts.

Punjabi broadcast channels outside India include MATV (Midlands Asian TV) based in the United Kingdom, which regularly hosts discussions on Sikh issues. Punjabi channels based in the United States include Jus Punjabi TV, which launched in 2008 as the first Punjabi channel in the United States based in New York. The Jus Punjabi TV channel regularly broadcasts segments from Sikh gurdwaras in the US (Sikhnet.com 2008), including the annual Sikh Day Parade in New York (Aujla, no date). Canada also has a significant number of Punjabi channels, including those broadcasting on the ATN (Asian Television Network), such as MH1 Channel and the ATN-Alpha ETC Punjabi Channel, both of which have broadcasted from Malton Gurdwara in Toronto (Newswire.ca 2010). One of the very first channels to carry Sikh programming in Canada was Vision TV, which was launched in 1988 to broadcast multi-faith programming (CRTC 2010).

While Dudrah argues that Zee TV led to the construction of a pan European South Asian identity (2002, 2005), for Mandair the emergence of Sikh television channels was a consequence of many Sikhs feeling “that their heritage was being diluted and often misrepresented by the predominantly Hindi and Bollywood programming in the earlier established channels like Zee TV and Sony TV” (2013: 207). Indeed, Roy links the revival of the Punjabi film industry to Sikhs being “conventionally represented in popular Hindi cinema either as brave warriors or as uncouth rustics . . . [leading them to] revive the Punjabi film industry as an attempt at authentic self-representation” (2014: 203). The importance of self-representation is a key aspect in the emergence of the various Sikh television channels, although the question of what types of Sikhs are being represented is also pertinent.

The Establishment of Sikh Television

The establishment of and demand for Sikh television channels may in part be driven by the same “reactionary” needs of religious television audiences highlighted by Abelman (1987) as viewers dissatisfied with content on mainstream and Punjabi television wish to engage with religious content. Of the various countries in the Sikh diaspora with large Sikh populations, the United Kingdom has led the way in the establishment of Sikh broadcast television channels. The Sikh Channel, which started broadcasting on April 13, 2009, via Sky satellite, was the first television channel dedicated to Sikh issues. Established by Davinder Singh Bal, the Sikh Channel became a registered charity in 2010, which then enabled fundraising activity. As the first Sikh channel to be established in Britain, the channel quickly became a focus for Sikhs with voluntary donations from viewers regularly amounting to over £750k per annum (<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5008628/governing-document>).

Sangat TV began broadcasting in the United Kingdom on September 1, 2010 (BizAsia.co.uk 2010). Also based in Birmingham, Sangat TV is wholly owned by the Sangat Trust and lists

Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia under “Persons with significant control” (see <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/07355264/persons-with-significant-control>). Particularly known as Bhai Mohinder Singh, the chairman of the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha UK (GNNSJ), this highlights close links between Sangat TV and the GNNSJ. The profile of Sangat TV was raised internationally during the West Midlands riots of August 2011 (Qureshi and Sweney 2011), when its presenter, Upinder Randhawa, broadcast live from the streets of Birmingham, most notably filming police in pursuit of rioters live on air (Karia 2011). This led to the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, mentioning the role of Sangat TV in a speech in the UK Parliament, stating, “Let me praise Sangat TV, which helped the police to catch a criminal. That was an exercise in social responsibility by a media company” (Hansard 2011).

While a channel titled Sikh TV’ launched in late 2010 (TheSikhTV.com 2010), the untimely death of its CEO Gagandeep (Gagandip) Singh in February 2011 (BBC News 2011) meant the channel shut down in the same year. The Akaal Channel was incorporated on July 30, 2012 (see <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/08161859>), and is based in Birmingham, established by its managing director, Amrik Singh Kooner, the director of The Sofa Factory, a warehouse, from where the channel broadcasts. In September 2015, the Akaal Channel, which describes itself as “the first UK channel under Sri Akal Takht Sahib” (Akaalchannel.tv), opened a branch in Amritsar (Sikh24.com 2015). The fourth and final Sikh television channel established in the United Kingdom, Khalsa TV, popularly known as KTV, was incorporated in Oct 2015 (Gov.uk) and launched in December 2016 (Baddhan 2016).

The only dedicated Sikh television channel based in the United States is the TV84 channel based in New York, owned by Global Sikh Affairs Media. Established in 2012, TV84 broadcasts Sikh related programming via Time Warner Cable and provides “a Sikh perspective for the current affairs that impact directly or indirectly to [the] punjabi community” (TV84.tv). In Canada, the UK-based Sikh Channel has broadcast on the ATN network since 2013. The only dedicated Sikh channel in India is Fateh TV, established in 2013 and based in Ludhiana, Punjab (Forbesindia.com 2010). Available through satellite and cable platforms, including Fastway Cable, Den Cable, and Inn Cable in India and on IPTV platforms including Jio TV, Tata Sky, Sling TV, and Real TV (ANI 2021), Rajwant Singh Vohra, the founder and managing director of Fateh TV, felt the need to establish a Sikh television channel as “most of the television industry was engrossed in the entertainment genre and youth’s interest in Sikh history-culture was getting diminished” (ANI 2021). Due to their relatively long establishment and for issues of comparison, in the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on the Sikh channels based in the United Kingdom.

Sikh Television Programming

An analysis of the programming schedules of the Sikh broadcast channels highlights significant similarities in scheduling. All four channels begin their daily programming offering combinations of Gurbani Kirtan, Nitnem, and Asa Di Vaar. These programs run from midnight to 7:00 a.m. after which a live breakfast show usually follows (*Live: The Breakfast Show* on Sikh Channel, *Good Morning Sangat* on Sangat TV, and *Good Morning KTV* on KTV). These breakfast shows usually mirror the format of breakfast shows broadcast on mainstream British television in the style of *BBC Breakfast/Good Morning Britain*, where two presenters discuss relevant topics and interview guests. Following this breakfast programming, a variety of different types of programs are broadcast throughout the day.

In their examination of common themes and topics in programming on religious television channels, Abelman and Neuendorf distinguish between social, political, and religious programs

where social and political programs are those where “the communicator does not explicitly state that views held on the topics represented those of some social or religious group or faction” (1987: 157), while religious programs “entail discussions of or references to the service, structure, function or faith of organized or unorganized individuals dedicated to an adherence to God or the supernatural” (1987: 157). An analysis of the programs on Sikh broadcast television channels highlights different types of programs as follows:

- 1 **Gurbani:** Renditions of Gurbani delivered either through reading (paath), through singing (kirtan), or through discourse (katha). These programs are usually not hosted and often take the format of live or recorded broadcasts from gurdwaras.
- 2 **Fundraising appeals:** Often run to assist families in Punjab, including Akaal Channel’s *Live: Anand Karaj Appeal* to assist families to arrange Anand Karaj ceremonies, Sangat TV’s *Sara Saal Langar Sewa* and *Sangat Aid Medical Fund* supporting food and medical initiatives in Punjab, Sikh Channel’s support of the Guru Panth Trust UK, and KTV’s support of the Pingalwara Charity based in Amritsar (KTV.global n.d.). Sikh Channel’s 2018 campaign to establish a SMART (Sikh Mediation and Rehabilitation Team) center for victims of child sexual exploitation raised over £50,000 in an evening through viewer pledges (SikhPA 2018).
- 3 **Health and well-being advice:** Examples include Akaal Channel’s *Advice Bureau* and Sangat TV’s *Sangat Health*. The channels also regularly host medical professionals or alternative medicine practitioners offering medical advice. Demonstrating its reach across the diaspora, in 2020, the Sikh Channel Canada started hosting programs for Apni Soch, a mental health charity for Sikh women (SikhChannel.tv n.d.a). Several programs were also produced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide health advice to Sikh viewers (University of Bedfordshire 2020).
- 4 **Community services:** Programs offering advice, most often relating to immigration, including KTV’s *Immigration Matters* program. Other services offered include matrimonial services, for instance including Sangat TV’s *Sangat Matrimonial* program.
- 5 **Educational programs:** There are several types of educational program, including Children’s programs, for instance Sikh Channel’s animated *Little Khalsa* (Jorawar Taak 2010), *Creative Khalsa* (SikhChannel.tv n.d.b), and KTV’s *KTV Bed Time Stories* (KTV 2020), which teach young children about Sikh concepts. Programs teaching the Punjabi language are also broadcast, including Akaal Channel’s *Punjabi Class* (Akaal Channel 2017). Educational programming is also provided in the form of quiz shows, which most often mirror mainstream UK media programming, including *Kaun Banega Gursikh Pyara* (*Who will become a beloved Gursikh?*) based on the popular *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Similarly, Sikh Mastermind based on the popular BBC quiz show *Mastermind*, is a program in which participants are asked questions about the Sikh scriptures, Sikh religion, and Sikh history (Lancashire Post 2016). Other programs focus on Sikh history, for instance, *Kirdar E Khalsa* broadcast on Akaal Channel.
- 6 **News and current affairs:** Many regular news broadcasts include news relating to events in Punjab. The channels also regularly broadcast programs about the politics of Punjab (e.g., Sikh Channel’s *SC India: Punjab News* and KTV’s *Awaz Punjab Di*) and also provide live reporting of incidents/breaking events affecting Sikhs. In 2010, Sikh Channel coverage of protests organized by the Satkaar campaign, including a protest at Grays Gurdwara in October 2010, raised the profile of these protests in mainstream media (Gulzar 2010). In 2011, following incidents where Sikhs had been asked to remove their turbans in airports, the Sikh Channel organized an International Turban Day in Birmingham and London and across several cities in Europe, including Brussels, Rome, and Madrid (Branagh 2011). In 2018, the Sikh Channel again co-organized a

turban awareness event in parliament following a racist attack outside Parliament (Rana 2018). Other incidents that have been covered live on the Sikh Channels include the 2014 attack on the Sikh gurdwara in Greece (Sikh Channel 2014), a protest in London against the imprisonment of Gurbaksh Singh Khalsa (Sikh Channel 2015c), and a report from Mold following an attack on a Sikh dentist (The Leader 2015). The fact that the Sikh Channel was able to engage Sikhs across Europe in this venture highlights its significant reach.

- 7 **Discussion shows:** As the first established Sikh broadcast channel, the Sikh Channel quickly became a focus for Sikhs to discuss relevant topics. The academic Dr. Gurnam Singh pioneered a series of Panth Time discussion programs on the Sikh Channel, which took place at various gurdwaras across the United Kingdom. As Dr. Gurnam Singh explains, the Panth Time program “managed to create a real interest in Sikh affairs, especially amongst educated Sikh professionals and those who perhaps were previously less interested . . . to create an open platform for Sikh communities across the world, but mostly in the UK, to engage in open and respectful dialogue about all matter of things concerning the Sikh Panth” (Singh G 2020). The Sikh Channel was also instrumental in the establishment of the Sikh Council UK following a “National Panth Time” held in April 2010 at the Maharaja Jassa Singh Ramgharia Hall in Birmingham, where 300 representatives from across the United Kingdom passed a unanimous resolution to establish an umbrella body for British Sikhs (Singh G. 2020). Having left the Sikh Channel to join the Akaal Channel, Dr. Gurnam Singh continues to host a weekly discussion program, the *One Show* on Akaal Channel. The Sikh Channel and Sangat TV also broadcast several discussion programs hosted by and targeting Sikh youth, although given the various regulatory issues with these (as discussed later in this chapter), many of these discussion shows have now been discontinued. The Sikh Channels have also broadcast political programming, including interviews with UK politicians (Mason 2016). For instance, following the publication of government papers relating to the United Kingdom government’s involvement in the events of 1984, the then prime minister, David Cameron, recorded a message for the Sikh Channel, which also hosted a roundtable debate between Conservative MP Paul Uppal and Labour MPs Pat McFadden and Tom Watson (Watt 2014).
- 8 **Arts and culture-based programs:** These include programs about Punjabi literature (authors/poets), for instance Akaal Channel’s Punjabi Virsa program.
- 9 **Documentaries:** These include documentaries about the grooming of Sikh women (Sikh24.com 2012) and about Sikhs communities in diaspora, including in Afghanistan (TheSikhnugget 2012), Russia (Sikh Channel 2015), and Panama (Sikh Channel 2019).

Sikh Television Audiences

While there are few reliable data for audience figures for the various Sikh channels, some data is available on the UK channels via BARB (Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board). BARB measures audience data by “placing electronic measurement equipment with a panel . . . of 5,100 households, sub-divisible by region” (Starkey 2010: 11), although this method of measurement impacts on certain demographic groups, including ethnic minorities, who may be precluded from accurate representation in samples (Starkey 2010). As the details of the BARB panel are not public, it is not clear how many Sikhs would be part of this panel. Nevertheless, although the Sikh Channel no longer submits data to BARB (Baddhan 2017), data from 2016 is available for both the Sikh Channel and Akaal Channel at www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/monthly-top-10/, with the top programs per month being as follows:

Table 40.1 Sikh Channel

Month	Program	Viewers (000s)
Jan 2016	D-LIVE: BABA DEEP SINGH JI (WED 27 JAN 2016, 1400)	31.9
Feb 2016	KIDS SHOW (TUE 02 FEB 2016, 0745)	45.5
Mar 2016	LEARN GURMUKHI (SUN 20 MAR 2016, 1700)	17
Apr 2016	GURBANI KIRTAN (THU 07 APR 2016, 0930)	12.7
May 2016	NAAM SIMRAN (TUE 17 MAY 2016, 0733)	29.4
Jun 2016	NAAM SIMRAN (TUE 14 JUN 2016, 0733)	93.4
Jul 2016	GURMAT SAMAGAM – PUNJAB (THU 21 JUL 2016, 1500)	15.3
Aug 2016	SIKH MASTERMIND (WED 03 AUG 2016, 1500)	7.1
Sept 2016	GURBANI KIRTAN (MON 12 SEP 2016, 0130)	13.5
Oct 2016	GROOMING SERIES (FRI 28 OCT 2016, 2030)	26.1
Nov 2016	NAAM SIMRAN (FRI 25 NOV 2016, 0733)	28.1
Dec 2016	GURBANI KIRTAN (WED 30 NOV 2016, 0930)	6.4

Table 40.2 Akaal Channel

Month	Akaal Channel	Viewers (000s)
Jan 2016	FATAFAT NEWS (SAT 23 JAN 2016, 0915)	29
Feb 2016	LIVE: MORNING SHOW (SAT 20 FEB 2016, 0815)	18.4
Mar 2016	AKAAL WORLD NEWS (SUN 03 APR 2016, 0935)	29
Apr 2016	FATAFAT NEWS (SUN 01 MAY 2016, 0915)	21.4
May 2016	DEVOTIONAL SONGS (WED 25 MAY 2016, 2045)	62.2
Jun 2016	AKAAL DISCUSSION: EDUCATION (MON 30 MAY 2016, 1145)	8.1
Jul 2016	CHAUPAI SAHIB (MON 04 JUL 2016, 0845)	9.8
Aug 2016	CHAUPAI SAHIB & SIMRAN (TUE 16 AUG 2016, 0725)	20.9
Sept 2016	AKAAL CHANNEL NEWS (FRI 16 SEP 2016, 2058)	7.2
Oct 2016	DOCUMENTARY: BANDI CHHOR DIVAS (SUN 30 OCT 2016, 0	14
Nov 2016	FATAFAT NEWS (SUN 20 NOV 2016, 0935)	21.6
Dec 2016	AKAAL COOKING SHOW (WED 30 NOV 2016, 1945)	34.3

An analysis of this BARB data from 2016 highlights how on the Sikh Channel, the two programs broadcast with the largest number of viewers were *Naam Simran* (June 2016) with 93,400 viewers and the *Kids Show* (Feb 2016) with 45,500 viewers. The average of the viewership of the top five programs broadcast on the Sikh Channel throughout 2016 was 15,500 viewers. On Akaal Channel during 2016, the top two programs in terms of viewership were *Devotional Songs* (May 2016) with 62,200 viewers and the *Akaal Cooking Show* with 34,300 viewers. The average viewership of the top five programs broadcast on the Akaal Channel throughout 2016 was 12,723 viewers. Based on BARB data, therefore, a generous estimate of the viewership of the Sikh television channels in the United Kingdom watching programs live would be an average of around 20K viewers.

Regulation

In November 2015, both the Sikh Channel and Sangat TV were reported as being “controlled by pro-Khalistan radicals” (Singh V 2015) in a dossier that was allegedly being presented by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron. The Sikh

Channels that broadcast in the United Kingdom are all regulated by OFCOM (the Office of Communication), the UK broadcasting regulator. These channels have all been subject to regulatory enquiries and in some cases sanctions for various reasons including:

- 1 **Procedural:** Particularly in the periods following their establishment, the Sikh Channel (OFCOM 2009), Sangat TV (OFCOM 2014), and KTV (OFCOM 2020a) were penalized for breaching OFCOM procedural rules, usually for giving undue prominence to products or services during programming and *for not making clear distinctions between content and advertising. Other procedural breaches include the Sikh Channel broadcasting political programs during a general election campaign (OFCOM 2010b), and repeatedly including footage of a dead child's naked body in a news segment (OFCOM 2017).*
- 2 **Impartiality:** The channels have on occasion breached Code 5.5 of the OFCOM code, for failing to maintain impartiality “on matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy” (OFCOM 2011b). The Sikh Channel Youth Show was found in breach in 2014 when discussing actions taken by the Indian government towards Sikhs in India, particularly including Operation Blue Star (OFCOM 2011b, 2014). Quotations from the 2014 program collated by OFCOM included “the environment in India is so toxic that really Sikhism cannot survive there in its present form, and in its truest form, within India as it stands.” OFCOM concluded that the program had failed in maintaining impartiality and had not provided alternative viewpoints and was therefore in breach.
- 3 **Harmful and/or offensive material:** OFCOM have found several programs in breach of rules 2.1 and 2.3; rule 2.1 for failing to “provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion . . . of harmful and/or offensive material” and rule 2.3 for not ensuring that “material which may cause offence is justified by the context.” In 2016, the Sikh Channel was found in breach for broadcasting a pre-recorded program during which a speaker had made statements including “Sikhs in the UK should not wait for a separate homeland of Khalistan in the Punjab” (OFCOM 2016b). In 2012, Sangat TV was found in breach for broadcasting a program during which a speaker made positive references to Manjit Singh and Rajinder Singh, both of whom were convicted for the murder of the preacher Darshan Das in Southall, West London (OFCOM 2013c). Similarly in February 2013, the Sangat TV Youth Show was found in breach for praising Balwant Singh Rajoana, who “was convicted of the assassination of the former Chief Minister of Punjab, Beant Singh on August 31, 1995” (OFCOM 2013d). Again in 2016, Sangat TV was found in breach for broadcasting a song called “Jinde Sukha Anthem” by Tigerstyle, which according to the complainant glorified the actions of Harjinder Singh Jinda and Sukhdev Singh Sukha (“Jinda” and “Sukha” respectively), who were members of the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) and who were hanged in 1992 for the assassination of General Arun Shridhar Vadiya, the chief of the Indian Army responsible for Operation Blue Star in 1984 (OFCOM 2012b). More recently, OFCOM found the broadcast of the music video “Bagga and Shera” on KTV in July 2018 in breach as the video “condoned, glamorised and justified violent acts and murders” (OFCOM 2019). Alongside this, KTV’s *Good Morning KTV* broadcast on February 20, 2018, was found in breach for including a documentary in the breakfast programming called “Final Assault,” which was found in breach for being inappropriately scheduled during a breakfast show. The program contained images of a man dragging a woman across the ground violently, a group of women looking frightened as they sat naked (although the image was partly obscured), surrounded by men wielding sticks, and a woman being dragged across the ground and thrown next to the group of women by the man (OFCOM 2019). The KTV *Panthak Masle* program broadcast on March 30, 2019, was found in breach (OFCOM 2019b) due to a complaint that a

panel discussion had “tried to incite fear and terror” towards Harnek Singh “Neki,” a Sikh radio presenter from New Zealand who was “said to have been ‘raising questions on’ and ‘criticising’ various aspects of the Sikh faith” (OFCOM 2019b). OFCOM also found the panelist’s statement that they had links with the Babbar Khalsa (BKI), a proscribed terrorist organization in the UK, to be “contrary to standards generally accepted by society” and therefore in breach. In October 2020, KTV was found in breach of its license for failing to provide qualifying revenue information when requested by OFCOM (OFCOM 2020b). Following another breach in which OFCOM concluded that *Prime Time*, a 95-minute live discussion program, included material likely to incite violence. In addition to these previous breaches, on March 31, 2022, OFCOM suspended KTV’s license (OFCOM 2022). At the time of writing, KTV is yet to respond to this suspension.

- 4 **Material likely to encourage or incite crime or lead to disorder:** In 2012, Sangat TV was fined £30,000 by OFCOM for broadcasting a debate program in which guests appeared to support the recent assassination attempt on the former Indian Army general, Kuldeep Singh Brar, who led Operation Blue Star in June 1984. As per OFCOM’s translation (OFCOM 2013a), the discussion included statements such as “whoever . . . has done this [assault on Lieutenant-General Brar] deserves to be congratulated because when I heard this news today, happiness surged in me.” In response, Sangat TV indicated that they would minimize the broadcasting of potentially “controversial” political programs; review their editorial policy and require all presenters and program contributors to sign formal agreements stating that they “understand the ground rules and boundaries while on air and that they take full responsibility for any personal comments that they may make and deal with any subsequent consequences that may arise.” Nevertheless, OFCOM concluded that “some members of the audience may have seen the panelists’ endorsements of the act of violence against Lieutenant-General Brar the previous day as implicit encouragement to repeat such an attack, or to carry out similar attacks against other individuals, such as members of the Indian armed forces connected with Operation Bluestar or supporters of the operation” and accordingly found the program in breach of rule 3.1 as it contained “material likely to encourage or to incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder.”
- 5 **Inappropriate Health Advice:** In June 2017, *Oftcom raised concerns about a program broadcast on the Sikh Channel about homeopathic healing (BBC News 2018) that included harmful material and contained repeated references to the presenter’s private business, a homeopathic clinic (OFCOM 2018). This case highlighted how the Sikh channels were considering international audiences as in its response the Sikh Channel stated that it had been “caught between the broadcast being for both a UK audience and an online audience also in the Punjab India” (OFCOM 2018). Akaal Channel was found in breach for two broadcasts of Advice Bureau in May 2017, a health program, broadcast mainly in Punjabi and hosted by Dr Abdul Wali, who was found in breach for unduly promoting his services (OFCOM 2017b). Akaal Channel was also found in breach for its broadcasts of Health Time in 2016, which OFCOM found contained harmful material and promoted the host’s business. In response, Akaal Channel explained that Health Time was acquired from a production company in India, which explained why viewers had not been advised to consult their own GP or seek independent medical advice during the program. In 2018 KTV was found in breach for a broadcast of the Acupressure Show as the program promoted the guest’s business and contained potentially harmful medical advice for instance “the presenter either acknowledged that there were benefits in conventional treatment, but implied that acupressure was more effective, or simply referred to acupressure as a cure for particular ailments” (OFCOM 2019a). In 2020, the Akaal Channel Live Akaal Advice Bureau was found in breach for the inclusion of harmful material in programs particularly about diabetes. OFCOM found that “patients diagnosed with type one*

diabetes might have understood from Dr W's statements that injecting insulin was unnecessary" (OFCOM 2020c) and that the host's statements "were presented as facts rather than as his own views, and they were not placed in appropriate context as such by, for examples, being challenged or through the presentation of alternative views" (OFCOM 2020c).

- 6 **Reputational Damage:** There have been several breaches of rule 7.1, which states that broadcasters must avoid unjust or unfair treatment of individuals or organizations in programs on the Sikh television channels. These have included allegations against individuals (OFCOM 2011a) and against gurdwaras committees (OFCOM 2012a).
- 7 **Indian Regulation:** The Sikh television channels based in the United Kingdom have on occasion been blocked from broadcasting online in India. In November 2015 the *Hindustan Times* reported that the Punjab government had decided to "crack down on Sikh websites, internet channels and social media pages spreading hatred and provoking youngsters to take the path of violence for the cause of Khalistan and other emotive religious issues" (Sethi 2015). According to this report, the police had informed the Indian department of electronics and information and technology (DIET) that the Sikh Channel "is hosting provocative messages by individuals residing in the UK, Australia and Canada . . . fueling unrest and could actually push gullible youngsters on the wrong path" (Sethi 2015). On June 6, 2020, several Sikh television channels, including Akaal Channel TV84 and KTV, were blocked from broadcasting on YouTube in India (Menon 2020). The blocking of the Akaal Channel appears to have followed a statement by parliamentarian Ravneet Bittu, the grandson of the former Punjab CM Beant Singh (Asia Samachar 2020), in which he stated that the Akaal Channel had been airing content that posed a threat to the integrity of India, by broadcasting an interview with the son of a Sikh militant, Rashpal Singh Chhandra (Sikh24.com 2020a). While the ban on Akaal Channel in India was revoked by YouTube on June 9, 2020 (Sikh24.com 2020b), this incident highlights the discomfort in India around some of the content being broadcast on Sikh television channels in the diaspora.

Summary

This examination of Sikh television channels has outlined their emergence and impact, focusing on the channels based in the United Kingdom. While scholarship on religious television has explored televangelism, this chapter has highlighted recent innovations in religious television media among Sikhs. While further detailed research is required to fully understand the role played by Sikh television channels for their audiences, the Sikh television channels clearly fulfil some of the "spiritually motivated goals" outlined by Campbell (2010: 26) in her examination of the impact of digital media: as a "worship space," where digital activities become part of a person's spiritual life as a "missionary tool" to promote a specific religion or set of beliefs and as an "affirmation tool" enabling users to cement their religious identity by connecting into a global, networked community of believers.

It is also clear that while the Sikh television channels in the United Kingdom initially tried to cater for various generations of Sikhs, the reduction in the number of Sikh youth programs being broadcast indicates that the channels are now primarily focused on Punjabi-speaking Sikhs, rather than Sikh youth. As has also been demonstrated, Sikh television programming has often been viewed with suspicion by regulatory authorities both in India and in the diaspora, particularly programs that glorify shaheeds (martyrs) and which focus on 1984 related content as these have been viewed as glorifying violence. There are several areas of future research, including examining Sikh television audiences in greater depth and understanding the relationship between Sikh television channels with other Sikh institutions. Indeed, while the various channels are similar in terms of their outputs, popularizing "a very specific mode of reasoning, ethical speech and lived-experience

that is meant to inculcate in its audiences certain shared dispositions meant for regulating Sikh identity” (Mandair 2013: 207), the various regulatory issues highlight how the content does vary, particularly around discussions of Sikh nationalism. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that while the figures may indicate that Sikh television channels have relatively low audience numbers and tend to be watched by Sikh elders, in an increasingly diverse digital world where media clips are rapidly shared via social media, content broadcast on Sikh television channels, particularly discussions on topical issues, often have a significant international reach.

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THE SIKH INTERNET

Conner Singh VanderBeek

Introduction

We live irrevocably in the era of the Internet, a world in which the digital is so integrated into real-world life that distinctions between “real” and “virtual” are becoming increasingly irrelevant (Lysloff 2003: 237). The Internet magnifies belief and identity, offers open space for both under-represented and fringe groups alike, and forms bridges between digital and physical communities. Sahana Udupa’s study of online Hindutva shows how Twitter has been a vibrant space for the cultivation of violent pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim rhetoric within a nation that has been swinging alarmingly fundamentalist in recent years (2015). Scholars in Sikh studies – W.H. McLeod, Harjot Oberoi, Pashaura Singh, Louis E. Fenech, and Anne Murphy – have found their works decried online and their positions and families harassed by a small but vocal contingent of Sikhs who consider these scholars’ works blasphemous (Axel 2001: 208; Sikh Sundesh n.d.). These digital forums have very real impacts on people’s lives, both in offering safe space and in fomenting discriminatory and destructive ideologies. Still, the Internet only can magnify what already exists in the real world (Jasjit Singh 2014: 93).

This chapter discusses the Sikh Internet: a collection of websites assembled around the human category of “Sikh” – “Sikh” as a faith-based practice, identity, lifestyle, and body of knowledge. In characterizing this assemblage, I first offer a framework for reading the Internet as a media technology and means of knowledge production that both diversifies and intensifies identity (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1990). This framework is built on Arjun Appadurai’s concept of mediascape, which encompasses the technologies that distribute information and images globally, the information being distributed, and the “large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ‘ethnoscapes’ to viewers throughout the world” (1990: 299). A mediascape is formed when an identity-based group begins using the Internet and Internet-connected technology to help construct itself. Next, I discuss the Sikh Internet through its main websites and through the narratives of *Sikhi* these pages construct. These examples show first how integrated the Internet has become in Sikh life, and second, how the Sikh Internet has shifted over time from intensifying Khalistani/Sikh separatist discourse to promoting a nation- and assimilation-friendly vision of Sikhi. The examples offered in this chapter offer a glimpse into the ever-expanding Sikh Internet and are, by no means, a complete road map.

Throughout this chapter, the Internet is variably read as a technology that interfaces with daily life, a media channel that allows for an ever-increasing amount of information to be transmitted farther and faster, a discursive space for identity formation, and an integral facet of daily life. But these facets all require living, breathing people to function. Media scholars Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska define the Internet as

not just the global system of computer networks but rather the whole technohuman ensemble consisting of servers, individual computers, cables, data flows, individual platforms, websites, and social networking portals such as Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon as well as their human users.

(2012: 161)

Kember and Zylinska include human users of the Internet as, themselves, a fundamental facet of the global, techno-human system. Correspondingly, this chapter reads examples of Internet use and presence as extensions or augmentations of extant social practices.

The Internet as Mediascape: Technology, Identity, Virtuality

The Sikh Internet is a mediascape comprised of numerous types of webpages, from open-source encyclopedias, to podcasts featuring prominent Sikhs in diaspora, to Sikh-themed fashion brands. This mediascape is in a mixture of English, Punjabi, and Gurbani; its technologies are the Internet and the devices that connect to it (computers, phones, televisions, etc.); and the audience created around its image repertoire is one that consumes, constructs, and reproduces the material within as they understand it to be Sikh.

Enmeshed in the concept of mediascape is Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, wherein identity-based groups (typically nations) are imagined from and consolidated around common systems of production and relations, technologies, and languages (1983: 43). The system of production here is the Internet: a media technology within which anyone can consume material that informs their identity. Whether this refers to the Hindutva subculture on Twitter or the parallel Internet created by China in Chinese, the Internet here is treated as an infinitely vast territory waiting to be carved by each new identity group that settles on it (Li 2012). For the Internet to be home to so many disparate subcultures, these groups must mutually understand its role in furthering the development of their extant identity formations.

Though Anderson reads systems of production as the cultures of print-capitalism that, through language, monopolize knowledge production, these dynamics also manifest in ritual practice. A gurdwara, for example, produces relations around common, ritualized reverence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The technologies within are the standardized Guru Granth Sahib that fixes the language of religious ritual practice (*gurbani*), the sound amplification used within the gurdwara grounds, and, if available, the projectors and monitor screens that display the sacred word and its translations – most likely downloaded from the Internet. Finally, the languages produced in these rituals are those of the Guru Granth Sahib and of its interpretation to the congregation. While in mainstream Sikhi this is predominately Punjabi-language translations of Gurbani text, language production extends to translations into English and the particularities of that style of English (i.e., the recurrence of the phrase “Husband Lord” in the official English translation of the Guru Granth Sahib, available online). Each congregation (*sangat*) is organized around these practices, thereby interlinking with the global body of Sikhs (*Panth*) who share these styles of devotion and organization.

Based on the above description, the systems that produce Sikh identity include the standardization of language (made possible through both print and Internet technologies) and the ritual practices built around said language. The Internet adds to this by allowing for the distribution of such supplementary material as the English translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the downloadable slideshows shown where projectors are available. Consequently, a gurdwara in the Chicago suburb of Palatine can display the same Gurbani text and translations as Bangla Sahib in New Delhi, as made possible by a nonprofit organization based in Sacramento, California (Khalis Foundation n.d.).

The Sikh Internet also supplements an existing ritual-material-spiritual network with spaces for discourse. One such space was *The Langar Hall*, a US-based Wordpress blog by and for Sikh diasporic youth that was active from December 2007 until October 2014 (*The Langar Hall* 2014). The site's description references "the many conversations that take place in langar halls around the globe," assuming prior experience with langar halls by the site's participants. *The Langar Hall* thus formed a virtual community that understood itself to be based on an existing space of Sikh socialization.

René Lysloff argues that virtual spaces can "support ongoing social collectivity" in ways that are just as real as in the corporeal world (2003: 238). This notion can be applied to the above examples of projected translations and of *The Langar Hall*. The former is a case in which Internet technology supplements a physical space by distributing translations of a sacred language. The latter case takes its inspiration from a physical space and asserts itself as an extension of such. At some point, these distinctions of "real" and "virtual" become somewhat arbitrary, in that the two formations are constantly in dialogue and are thus mutually informing one another.

The Sikh Internet, therefore, is a mediascape comprised of numerous types of webpages, mostly in English, that supplements lived Sikh experience. This includes, among other categories, resources on the *Guru Granth Sahib* (search databases, translations, slideshows for religious services, and mobile apps for personal use), centralized sites for major religious bodies within *Sikhi* (SGPC; Akhand Keertanee Jathaa/AKJ; Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization/3HO, Damdami Taksaal, etc.), activist group pages (Khalsa Aid, Sikh Coalition, SALDEF, the Sikh Foundation, Jakara Movement), and platforms for discussion, debate, and education (sikhchic, Naad Pargaas, SikhRI, Basics of Sikhi, etc.). This mediascape assumes some level of experience with Sikh social spaces and subjectivities of its users and, in catering specifically to this imagined community, also standardizes and consolidates Sikh identity and practice around common language(s), morals, and beliefs. The Sikh Internet also refers to the real-life spaces that have been opened by use of the Internet, whether translations, podcasts, or streaming apps. The following section maps out the Sikh Internet and the readings of Sikh subjectivity it has prioritized since its inception.

Mapping the Sikh Internet

The Sikh Internet emerged as a series of informational and news websites alongside an existing mediascape of newspapers, calling card services, and within a few years, satellite television networks (VanderBeek 2016). This early Internet served Sikhs by offering news bulletins largely reporting discrimination against Sikhs, learning resources on the faith, and discussion forums that covered topics young Sikhs could not otherwise explore in their real-life communities (Jasjit Singh 2014: 86). Aside from ebbing and flowing advocacy for Khalistan and for the recognition of human rights abuses by the Indian government, Sikh sites have remained largely static. Sikh sites work to bolster Sikh identity among youth and to improve the image of diasporic Sikhs in the public eye – to create good, model Sikhs who can adjust well to Western society (Sian 2013: 39).

The first Sikh website, www.sikhs.org, was launched in 1994 (Jasjit Singh 2014: 83). The site was mostly comprised of bulletin boards that debated topics pertinent to Sikhs – including meat eating,

caste, hair, issues between Sikhs and Punjabi culture, issues between Sikhs and non-Sikhs, and gender, among others (84). Sikhs.org and pages like it (i.e., www.sikhcoalition.org) provided links to news stories pertaining to Sikhs in the diaspora, offering a centralized hub for information. This early Internet, however, required a dial-up modem, a computer, and some basic level of computer literacy that constrained the reach of these sites (84).

The following sites emerged soon thereafter including SikhNet.com (archived on the *Wayback Machine* as early as 1996), Khalistan.net (archived 1996–2010), AKJ.org (archived since 1999), and SikhiWiki (launched 2005) (Jasjit Singh 2014: 84). SikhNet.com was founded by 3HO Sikh Gurmustuk Singh as a means of educating people – Sikh and non-Sikh alike – on the basics of *Sikhi* (Sikh Seminar 2015). This includes histories and hagiographies from the time of the Sikh Gurus, recordings of *kirtan* (sacred hymns) and *katha* (interpretation) online, and stories of Sikhs doing good in the UK, Canada, and the US (SikhNet 2019). A major aim throughout the tenure of SikhNet has been to make the Sikh faith friendly, accessible, and entirely peaceful, seen by a poster housed on the landing page in 2001 – shortly after 9/11 – that read “SIKHS” above a collage of Sikh men, women, and children with American flags, and “Proud to be AMERICANS” beneath (SikhNet 2001 via Wayback Machine 2019). SikhNet also presents Sikhs as either ethnic Punjabis who may or may not keep a turban and hair, or as white people who keep turban and hair. This site foregrounds respectability politics, valorizes authority, and promotes a nonthreatening version of Sikhs vis-à-vis the nation-state.

While these original sites were largely about positive optics in the Western state, Khalistan.net was a site that promoted a vision for separate Sikh statehood from India. This aim was primarily outlined through recognition of human rights violations against Sikhs by the Indian government and of the liberation of Sikhs and Khalistan through nonviolent means, as outlined in the call for Khalistan at the 1993 United Nations Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations meeting (Olsthoorn and Simpson 1993: 25). The site provided reading on issues related to Khalistan – from images of martyrs, to articles condemning the Indian state for attempting genocide, to a submission portal for reporting hate crimes against Sikhs.

Khalistan.net presents a largely nonviolent face to a movement populated by multiple terrorist-designated organizations (Mohan 2018). One such issue surrounds the 1985 Air India bombing, which killed 329 people, mostly Canadians (Nijhawan 2016: 201). Though the official account is that the violent separatist group Babbar Khalsa committed the attack, Khalistan.net cites sources suggest that the entire incident was a frame job by the Indian Intelligence Service (Khalistan.net 2004 via Wayback Machine 2019).

Brian Keith Axel fits Khalistan.net into a broader mediascape that circulates photographs of tortured Sikh male bodies. These images construct a basic Sikh subject (turban, bearded Punjabi male) who has been denied a homeland (Khalistan), and the violation of the body is equivalent to the violent oppression of all Sikhs by the Indian government. Axel calls Khalistan.net a “cyber-archive,” noting how the uncannily intimate act of torture of Sikh bodies by the Indian state was made public and widely circulated by Khalistani activists alongside survival testimonials (2004: 35). This created a juxtaposition in which the words of survivors were grafted onto the images of the dead as though the living subject, without Khalistan, had as much power in the world as the dead.

Though Axel cites the Internet as a major technology in the circulation of Khalistan and its image repertoire, traces of this revolutionary Khalistan are difficult to find. Khalistan.net has been defunct since 2010. Its founder’s Twitter page has been inactive for over five years, and the YouTube channel for KhalistanNet has been shut down. It is not until the third page of a Google query that a search of “Khalistan” links to a Sikh-run website. This corresponding SikhiWiki article on the Khalistani movement does not present separatist Sikhs as blameless (SikhiWiki 2019). Two of the

externally linked sites relating to Khalistan – for the terrorist-designated Dal Khalsa (www.dalkhalsa.com) and Never Forget '84 (www.neverforget84.com) – have been shut down. Sikh Genocide Project (www.sikhgenocide.org) and Saint Soldiers (www.saintsoldiers.net) are active, but they commemorate martyrs and track arrests of Sikh activists in ways that portray those maimed or killed as wholly peaceful victims of a predatory state. Openly pro-Khalistan content, if it is not wiped or buried, is intensely and unanimously criticized by online Canadian and Indian media outlets – as can be noted through a simple Google search of “Khalistan news.” Online criticism of the movement seems to have crowded out the movement itself.

While Axel credits the Internet with the circulation of images of tortured Sikh bodies, these are no different than the images of martyrs shared in the Central Sikh Museum on the Golden Temple grounds, in the langar halls of gurdwaras throughout the diaspora, and at pro-Khalistani contingents at *nagar kirtan* parades and festivals throughout Sikh communities in the UK and North America. Regardless of whether the Internet did originally circulate these images, they have already reached the popular conscience of everyday, offline Sikh practice. The Internet-tethered Khalistani imagery that Axel outlines seems to have migrated off the web.

The next two sites listed in the outset of this section are AKJ.org and SikhiWiki.org: a website for a movement within Sikhi and an encyclopedic, Wikipedia-style database for Sikhs. AKJ fits into a distinct category of websites that represent major movements within Sikhi, along with Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (www.sGPC.net), 3HO (www.3ho.org), Damdami Taksal, (www.damdamtaksal.com/), Nanaksar Satsang Sabha (<http://gurdwaranaksar.org/>), and a looser patchwork of diasporic gurdwaras that house their own websites. Sites like these have become the dominant face of *Sikhi* as the Khalistan movement has subsided, and they give the faith more of a World Religion-styled look and feel.

The format for these websites is fairly consistent; atop the pages is a navigation bar that includes (1) the movement's mission and/or code of conduct (*maryada*); (2) history of that movement; (3) audio and visual material relevant to the movement, including recordings of *kirtan* (sacred hymns), *katha* (interpretation), news, and downloadable content; (4) a repository for upcoming events; and (5) a contact page for each organization. Sites like these also include images of the gurdwaras they represent and/or practicing members of their movement. 3HO and AKJ are member-focused, while SGPC and Nanaksar Satsang Sabha are gurdwara-focused.

These sites each have idiosyncrasies as well. SGPC's website allows visitors to stream the audio feed coming directly from the Golden Temple complex. SGPC's site is also in a mix of Punjabi and English, and it provides resources for learning Punjabi and translating between Shahmukhi (for Pakistani Punjab) and Gurmukhi (for Indian Punjab). 3HO and SikhNet promote Kundalini yoga and the unique tenets of Yogi Bhajan's sub-movement within Sikh practice. Akhand Keertanee Jathaa's page promotes its *kirtan* gatherings (*smagam*) and commitment to Sikh martial arts (*gatka*). Each movement has a different central focus.

These movement-based sites were soon followed by encyclopedia and database websites like SikhiWiki (www.sikhiwiki.org) and SikhiToTheMAX (www.sikhithemax.org), which offer a more search engine-styled approach to navigating information on the faith. SikhiWiki (est. 2005), like community-edited database Wikipedia (est. 2001), provides the most comprehensive resource on basic terms, tenets, and histories of the Sikh faith. SikhiToTheMAX (est. 2000) is a software and website built for finding passages in the Guru Granth Sahib. As mentioned earlier, SikhiToTheMAX has made it possible to offer live projections and translations of Gurbani in active gurdwaras (SikhiToTheMax About n.d.). Other similar search engines include Sri Granth (www.sriganth.org), Search Gurbani (www.searchgurbani.com), and smartphone apps like iGurbani, iSearch Gurbani, Sundar Gutka, MySikhi, and so on (SikhNet.com n.d.). Gurbani is now literally searchable

anywhere at any time, provided one has a smartphone or other digital reading device. Moreover, anyone can stream endless hours of *kirtan*, for example, through a slew of streaming and downloading websites (YouTube, iTunes, GurbaniKirtan24/7).

Jasjit Singh argues that the Internet allows for digitally based modes of religious devotion. Platforms like mobile apps allow Sikhs, for example, to take *hukamnamas* (orders) on a daily basis, giving them personal access to the Guru Granth Sahib without the mystifying structure of the gurdwara service (2014: 88). Sikh mobile apps and streaming services offer more varied and immediate content than previously did television, radio, cassette tapes, or CDs: *nitnem* (daily prayers), *kirtan*, *katha*, *akhand paath* (continuous reading), and so on. The Internet thereby supplements and accelerates the preexisting possibility of a Sikh religiosity that – while still in reference to structure of the gurdwara service – does not require physical presence in a place of worship.

Despite the Internet opening access to information, it cannot supplant in-person practice. Jasjit Singh, in surveying young Sikhs in Britain, found that Sikhs can be overwhelmed by the excess of available opinions on the Internet, and that the best places to turn are “personally accessible religious authorities” (2014: 90). Moreover, these varied websites do not simulate the feeling of a centralized digital authority on all things Sikh, in that someone just starting – and with no point of reference to corporeal, “offline” Sikh practice – would have little idea of where to begin. *Sikhi*, ultimately, is as much a social practice as a body of knowledge, and the Internet cannot emulate being present in a *sangat*.

The next category of websites includes blogs, podcasts, and Sikh organizations – all of which have been a part of the Sikh Internet since its inception. These sites are grouped together because their content is interrelated; they all work to craft the image of peaceful Sikhs who empower themselves and others. This category includes activist sites like US civil rights groups Sikh Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) and Sikh Coalition, humanitarian groups like United Sikhs and Khalsa Aid, and outreach groups like Sikh Activist Network (SAN), Jakara Movement, and SikhRI. These sites are all based on similar principles. First is the acknowledgment of the human race as one and of the abolishment of any and all forms of discrimination. Next is the cultivation of a humanitarian ethos specific to Sikh values, whether that be for the service of humanity at large or for Sikh assimilation in specific locales. Sikh Coalition, for example, was founded after the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona, immediately after 9/11. The organization focuses specifically on the rights of Sikhs in the United States to live free of racial profiling, discrimination, and hate.

These types of sites also promote the production of a body of knowledge and culture informed by Sikh practice, identity, philosophy, and values. Naad Pargaas is a scholarly organization based in Amritsar that applies Sikh philosophy to contemporary life. Sikhchic is an online arts and culture newspaper that discusses pressing community questions and highlights the accomplishments of Sikhs in Western and Indian popular culture and society (T. Sher Singh 2013). Basics of Sikhi is an educational organization that teaches about Sikhi through YouTube videos, social media, and speakers at public events (Basics of Sikhi n.d.). National Sikh Campaign’s *Sikh Meets World* podcast features exemplary Sikhs in Western society, particularly as a way to inspire Sikhs to follow a somewhat neoliberal model of success (Sikh Meets World “About” 2019; Kember and Zylinska 2012: 159).

Blogs, podcasts, and social media platforms have spread the capabilities of the layperson to share their opinions on the Internet. For example, Rupinder Singh Mohan’s *American Turban* WordPress blog highlights “that it is indeed possible to live and thrive as turban-wearing Sikh in this country” (Singh Mohan n.d.). *The Langar Hall* debated topics pertinent to its Sikh youth readership. Sikh Digital Library is a Blogspot page that shares archival sources on Sikh history from Guru Nanak to the present in English, Hindi, and Punjabi (Sikh Digital Library n.d.). A survey of blogs archived on *SikhiWiki* shows that only a small number of blogs remains active, as the spaces these sites have

opened have largely been absorbed by larger, more centralized platforms like Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube. Michael Nijhawan notes that the Internet and social media have offered spaces for activism independent of the entrenched politics of gurdwaras (2016: 204).

The Sikh Internet has variably been invested in promoting Khalistan and denouncing it, advocating for Sikh resistance to the nation-state and for assimilation within it, and in determining what, exactly, should be the Sikh code of conduct. It is organized around an identity based in religion, but it is constantly debating what shape that religion should take. It fiercely debates Punjab and the role of Punjabi culture in Sikhi but does so in English and behind computer screens in the UK and North America. Despite these contradictions, the Sikh Internet has succeeded in its original goal of ensuring that anyone, anywhere has access to a basic definition of *Sikhi*.

Conclusion

The two-and-a-half-decade-long history of the Sikh Internet tells a story of how Sikhs have grappled with how to construct their place in the globalized world. The Sikh Internet emerged on the heels of the violent crackdown of the Khalistan movement in Punjab by the Indian army. While the Internet initially provided a means of circulating Khalistani ideals and imagery, this eventually gave way to an attempt to reconstruct Khalistan as a peaceful, democratic movement. Khalistan since has been largely replaced by a post-9/11 anxiety of Sikhs being misread as terrorists or Muslims, thus guiding them towards performing a model minority status that highlights their distinctly Sikh identity (Sian 2013). However, as Katy Pal Sian argues,

There is thus a clear paradox being created where we see attempts to assert a Sikh identity; however this can only be imagined in the context of a westernising gaze which sees no future for these proud heritages except through uncritical assimilation into the host society.

(44)

It is by the process that Sian describes that Sikhs, since 9/11, have been actively invested in being read as nonthreatening. This disavowal of terrorism and pursuit of assimilation, ironically, is at the expense of the political potential of Sikh thought to enact change on the structure of society. The Internet has been at the forefront of this image campaign.

The second observation about the Sikh Internet is that small-time blogs and discussion forums have either disappeared, been discontinued, or migrated to more popular Internet platforms. Though social media is beyond the purview of this chapter, it is necessary to note the importance of Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram in increasing the visibility and connectedness of Sikhs on the Internet in Western society (Jasjit Singh 2014: 84). Kember and Zylinska note that technology is always replacing older technology, particularly how personal devices like the cellphone have supplanted more communal modes of media (2014: 115). On the same token, mobile and social media – video sharing, in particular – have largely replaced static websites and blogs (Wolcott 2018; Cohen-Sheffer 2016). This explains why so many of the websites described throughout this chapter that are not tied to Sikh organizations are currently defunct; they have not been able to keep up with these shifts and corresponding technological demands. Sites like Basics of Sikhi – whose homepage is fully integrated with original content on Facebook and YouTube – are emblematic of the kinds of content today's Internet prioritizes.

The final observation is that the Sikh Internet has made learning about Sikhi dramatically easier, though this Sikhi is based much more on descriptions and summaries of the faith rather than substantial engagement with its sacred texts, philosophies, and primary sources. Despite the wellspring

of information available on the Internet, the Sikh Internet has not inherently changed the ways in which *Sikhi* is practiced or the sources of authority within communities (Jasjit Singh 2014: 94). Moreover, a major preoccupation of the Sikh Internet has been standardizing who and what is a Sikh for the sake of playing identity politics (VanderBeek 2019: 8). The consequence of having more information about Sikhi available online is that there are more opportunities to standardize and police what the faith, socially speaking, is meant to be. The Internet offers more platforms through which Sikhs can be visible, but also more spaces of encounter where they decide how they should be seen.

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SIKHS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker

Introduction

Sikhs are creating a new virtual world through social media that represents multiple dimensions of Sikh identity, agency, and expression at the intersections of art, activism, entertainment, education, and religion. In less than two decades social media has birthed virtual communities where Sikhs connect and engage with one another by sharing experiences, knowledge, and resources. Sikh youth have grown up as “digital natives” and are at the forefront of many social platforms, creating their own discursive agency that speaks within and between multiple spaces and contexts, reflecting their hybridized and diasporic identities.

While these spaces are beneficial in empowering diverse Sikh voices and creating global communities, at the same time, social media operates within an attention economy where personal preferences, algorithms, and social rankings silo users and content into echo-chambers. This has the negative effect of erasing diverse voices and creating polarizing perspectives within this discursive apparatus. The public and searchable nature of social media has also unearthed new forms of violence such as cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking by users or troll-bots that attack Sikhs as a form of cyberwarfare.

As a response to hate crimes, marginalization, surveillance, and silencing within religio-ethnonational contexts, Sikh individuals and organizations continue to harness the power of social media to tell their stories, educate public audiences, garner political support, and build solidarity with other minoritized and oppressed groups for a transpersonal sovereignty. I use “transpersonal sovereignty” as a relationship to the other beyond the ego in line with what Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair terms “heteronomic sovereignty” (in contradistinction to modern individualized notion of “autonomic sovereignty”) as a “lived experience” of *śabad-guru* and *miri-piri* as an “internal diversity” without a “metaphysical distinction between the spiritual and worldly, the religious and the political” (Mandair 2013: 189). While the approaches and goals of Sikh representation may differ within multicultural, multireligious, and ethnonational contexts, the multiplicity of Sikh voices and identities expressed through the various platforms cannot be siloed into any one homogeneous category. Overall, social media operates as a double-edged sword providing productive possibilities for self-representation, community creation, and political organization, as well as problematic potentials for ego-centered identification, self-gratification, and religiopolitical polarization. Nevertheless, as a

virtually accessible global environment, social media offers a glimpse into the dynamic living experiences and expressions of Sikhi that continue to develop through time and space.

Virtual Sangat

This chapter was written during a time when the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic is overrunning hospitals worldwide with escalating death tolls, shutting down businesses and economies, skyrocketing unemployment. By governmental mandate people are quarantining, isolated from loved ones, practicing physical “social distancing” as they work and school from home, taking everyone into virtual communities. As people are experiencing the longing of separation, grief of loss, and craving community, they find human connection through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snapchat, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Zoom.

A partly free, easy-to-use, and high-quality videoconferencing app founded in 2011, Zoom has become “vital social media” (Beller Mar 24, 2020), connecting people across the globe. Sikh communities and individuals around the world are now livestreaming their gurdwara services and kirtan programs through face-to-face engagement on Zoom as well as synchronous livestreams and asynchronous recordings through Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

In April 2020 and 2021, due to the continued waves of Coronavirus outbreaks and its variants, Vaisakhi celebrations were virtually livestreamed through Facebook and YouTube. This enabled people across the globe to attend international events commemorating the birth of the Khalsa from the safety of their homes. The students who take my “Sikhism: Warrior Saints” class at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles were unable to attend the annual thousand-person event at the Convention Center, which had been repurposed as a coronavirus treatment center. Instead, they virtually engaged with Vaisakhi and gurdwara services through livestreams of *kirtan* (devotional music) and *katha* (exegesis) held in vacant gurdwaras or homes and took 360-degree tours of the Golden Temple on YouTube. While Sikh communities worldwide missed the in-person experience of *sangat* (community) and *seva* (service), the accessible nature of technology enlivened the Guru Granth (scripture as Guru) and Guru Panth (Guru’s congregation) through home screens, creating virtual *sangat* that extends beyond geographic and religious borders. Sikhs in social media spaces mirror the functions of their online presence as surveyed by Jasjit Singh’s 2014 article “Sikh-ing online” modeled after Campbell’s (2010) five categories for online religious participation: spiritual networks, worship spaces, missionary tools, affirmation tools, and functional technology (Singh 2014: 85).

To honor the pluriversal vision of Guru Nanak on his 550th birth anniversary, the “YaarAnad Virtual Baithak Series” livestreamed over 200 daily performances and discussions with world-renowned artists and scholars through Facebook and YouTube. Curated and hosted by thirteenth generation Gurbani Sangeet exponent Bhai Baldeep Singh, this series created a heterogeneous *sangat* space of encounter and education as audiences witnessed GurSikh memory, epistemology, and praxis in dialogue with experts from diverse genres, geographies, languages, religions, and cultures. In the words of student and scholar Nihal Singh, the virtual series “created the cultural space for *vidyā* [knowledge] and *vidvāns* [knowledge bearers] to enrich, ennoble, and instruct our public life.” Nihal Singh, author of the VitalAnjan.com, shared his insights at the live “Virtual Baithak,” April 16, 2021, honoring its one-year anniversary. The series offered a respite amidst the sociopolitical turmoil of the times, never-ending news cycles, and doom-scrolling that infiltrated everyday quarantined life. As “a melodious treat to beat their lockdown blues” (Kaur May 21, 2020), it created a welcoming space for virtual *sangat* in communal harmony.

Counterpublics: Third Spaces for Sikhi to Speak

Virtual spaces have the capacity to create openings to a wider sense of community, identity, and epistemic formation by transgressing sociocultural and religiopolitical borders. They can be understood as a “third space” (Bhabha 2004) between and beyond India and the diaspora where Sikh hybrid identities of diverse backgrounds and localities can come together through artistic and religious expression and engagement. Virtual environments may serve as intersectional spaces to (de)construct identity and educate audiences in aspects of Sikh culture, identity, and politics beyond the normative discourse often propagated in mainstream, neoliberal, and nationalist media outlets.

Sikh postcolonial scholar Gurminder Kaur Bhambra acknowledges the ways in which coloniality and modernity exert their power and control through discursive spaces which erase racialized and gendered voices (Bhambra 117). Can alternative discursive spaces driven by individual expression and social relationships allow marginalized voices to communicate their own lived realities? Communities may resist the “hierarchies of oppression” fueled by coloniality, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, by “listening and learning from others . . . away from current dominant structures of knowledge production” (Bhambra 119). Social media may serve as a counterpublic third space where pluriversal perspectives and plurivocal voices can learn from one another and envision a freedom beyond dehumanizing and polarizing narratives. It therefore becomes important to question the intention and purpose of social media engagement. When approached through a Sikh lens, it is important to acknowledge whether the aim is to serve a higher purpose in connection with GurSikh knowledge and praxis (*nirankari*), create community (*sangati*), cultivate transpersonal sovereignty (*sant-sipahi*), serve those in need (*sevadari*), please a patron (*darbari*), or market oneself for public consumption (*bazaari*). Here I expand upon the notions of *nirankari*, *darbari*, *bazaari* learned from Bhai Baldeep Singh (Khalsa 2014).

Bazaari: Ego-Centered Attention Economy

While social networks can reposition knowledge and cultural production by engaging counterpublic voices in political activism and democratic debate, neoliberal economies still exclude people from Habermas’s utopian possibilities of the public sphere. Many do not have access to a phone, computer, tablet, or the Internet, and those with access are still subject to elite prestige systems, corporate interests and their concomitant narratives and agendas (Jackson and Welles 2016: 397). The egocentric and self-serving economy of social media technology “mirrors our desires” so that “we feel increasingly insignificant” and therefore “desire the affirmation of being reflected” (Rokeby 1995: 155). To be seen as significant within this “attention economy,” users strategically work to increase followers by curating their identity and self-brand online through various attention-getting techniques traditionally employed by consumer brands (Marwick 2015: 137). The “highly visible metrics of social media success” may either be used as a self-empowering medium that enables those “outside of the norms to become popular” or may demonstrate an “epidemic of narcissism” within this “attention economy” (Marwick 2015: 141).

Within the public marketplace, social media serves as a mirror to reflect, represent, and curate our identity and desires for human consumption, whereby the insecure ego can be acknowledged, affirmed, and antagonized. Scholars have noted how “rarely informed and reasoned debate occurs online” because it is “created by the corporate world ‘to inspire and privilege commodified desires’ (Lockard 1997: 225)” (Lysloff 2003: 255–256). The negative implications of the constant influx of (mis)information and attention becomes “intoxicating” making us “unconscious, incapable of

reflection” and “relieves the burden of responsibility, because there is no time to measure the consequences of an action” (Rokeby 1995: 155).

Even as people may seek virtual community online, the algorithms to capture attention, track data, and curate isolated feeds have had the negative effect of curating false personas, disconnecting people from thoughtful engagement with one another, siloing individuals and communities within their own insular narratives, propagating sensationalist agenda-driven rhetoric, and deepening religio-political polarization. Social media platforms such as YouTube have been used to disseminate counter-narratives, with some turning to these unverified alternative outlets as “trusted” sources for news and information. Left unchecked, the deluge of (mis)information and propaganda within these spaces has sown seeds of distrust in traditional news media, causing great hermeneutic chaos and confusion as to what is fact versus opinion. Radicalized extremist groups have been pushed into underground and alternative social media sites further inciting hate rhetoric and violence against minoritized communities.

The lack of conscious thought, impulsive interactions, and separatist ideologies created by attention-seeking, ego-centered, and power-driven economies can be counterbalanced by Sikh teachings to curate conscious communities and intentional spaces (*sat sangat*) by surrendering self-centered motives (*haumai*) and serving others (*seva*) for personal and communal well-being (*sahej*) and mutual sovereignty (*sant-sipahi*). As social media mirrors individual and group consciousness, by harnessing the transformative potentials of Sikh thought and praxis, users can move beyond the trappings of a self-centered economy and reorient their relationships through an economy of care or *seva* (Khalsa-Baker 2017). By so doing, historically marginalized communities may come together to support and fight for one another as sage warriors (*sant-sipahi*) when injustices have occurred.

Darbari Politics of Representation: Advocacy and (Anti)Assimilation

After 9/11, as Sikhs became the targets of Islamophobic, xenophobic, and racist hate crimes, including the murder of a Sikh man Balbir Singh Sodhi by a self-professed white supremacist, Sikhs responded to the crisis by organizing in person and online. They created legal and educational organizations which trained Sikh lawyers and millennial activists on how to use the power of media to represent themselves, to tell their own stories, amplify Sikh voices and messages, educate the wider public, and advocate for legal protections. These advocacy organizations include US-based Sikh Coalition [[@SikhCoalition](#)], Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) [[@SikhAmericans](#)], United Sikhs [[@UnitedSikhs](#)], We Are Sikhs [[@WeAreSikhs](#)], as well as UK based Sikh Education Council [[@TheSikhWay](#)] and Canadian-based World Sikh Organization [[@WorldSikhOrg](#)].

However, within “secular” national contexts, Sikhs have been called to represent their values and identities in response to national policies based on religious or cultural minoritization, multiculturalism, citizenship, and securitization. Since the “religious” tensions inherent in “secular” nationalisms emphasize conformity to redress “deviant” religious markers such as the turban (Puar 2008), Sikhs have used media to represent themselves as peaceful, law-abiding, service-oriented citizens. Some have aligned Sikh values with American values, causing activists and scholars to internally critique the politics of representation and assimilation in a nation built upon white supremacy, slavery, racist immigration policies, and religious discrimination (Judge and Brar 2017). To better negotiate the tensions inherent in representing Sikhs within ethno-religio-national contexts, sociologist Harleen Kaur finds that it is more effective to look to Sikh values and identity as historically resistant to normative ideologies while acknowledging the diversity within Sikh identity itself (Kaur Harleen 2020).

Sant-Sipahi: Activism as Sage-Warriors

In 2012, after a white supremacist killed six and injured four at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, Sikhs took to social media platforms to raise awareness, organize interfaith solidarity efforts, educate the public about Sikh experiences, and serve other marginalized communities that have continued to be the targets of hate crimes (Valarie Kaur 2012). On New Year's Eve 2016, after Trump's election precipitated another rise in white supremacist hate rhetoric and violence, a speech by Punjabi-American Sikh activist and lawyer Valarie Kaur at an interfaith gathering in the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church went viral across social media platforms with nearly 40 million views. This video amplified a millennial female Sikh voice calling upon the powerful Sikh vision of interconnected Oneness (*Ik Oankar*) that sees "no one as an enemy, no one as a stranger" (GGS 1299) (Valarie Kaur 2020).

In America today, as we enter an era of enormous rage, as white nationalists hail this moment as their great awakening, as hate acts against Sikhs and our Muslim brothers and sisters are at an all-time high, I know that there will be moments . . . where my son will be seen as foreign, as suspect, as a terrorist. Just as black bodies are still seen as criminal, brown bodies are still seen as illegal, trans bodies are still seen as immoral, indigenous bodies are still seen as savage, the bodies of women and girls seen as someone else's property. And when we see these bodies not as brothers and sisters then it becomes easier to bully them, to rape them, to allow policies that neglect them, that incarcerate them, that kill them.

(<https://valariekaur.com/2017/01/watch-night-speech-breathe-push/>)

To endure the long labor of liberating national and religious ideals from their embeddedness within systems of oppression, she calls upon the Sikh spirit of ever-rising optimism (*chardi kala*) and the power of "revolutionary love."

What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? . . . We will labor in love through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children. *Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!* (The beloved community belongs to divine Oneness, and so does all that it achieves.)

(Ibid.)

As countries across the world continue to burn with the virus of hate, fear, and insecurity, the Sikh vision of love beyond bounds echoes as a guiding light through social media channels of activists, artists, and interfaith leaders.

To make positive change during these dark times, Sikhs in political activism continue to harness the powerful spirit of the sage-warrior (*sant-sipahi*) who fights for mutual sovereignty through an ethic of service, love, and courage. This ethos was further demonstrated in a 2017 viral YouTube video by Canadian politician Jagmeet Singh, who was heckled on the campaign trail by a white woman yelling in his face, "When is your Sharia going to end?" Rather than getting angry or responding with hate and condescension, Singh shared his political perspective:

We believe in love and courage. We believe in an inclusive Canada where no one is left behind. We believe in economic justice for everybody. We believe in celebrating all diversity. We don't want to be intimidated by hate. We don't want hate to ruin an event. So, let's show how we would treat someone with love.

As she continued to demonstrate her xenophobia and Islamophobia, the crowd began chanting his campaign slogan “Love and Courage!” Jagmeet Singh continued to respond calmly, “We welcome you. Everyone in this room loves you. We support you. We believe in your rights.” As she left the floor, he addressed the audience:

Listen, you know, growing up as a brown skin, turban, bearded man, I’ve faced things like this before, it’s not a problem, we can deal with it. There’s gonna be other obstacles we’re going to face and we’re going to face them with what? With love and courage, we can overcome anything.

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=y67DnNRPszA)

Sikh political activists continue to use the wide-reaching capabilities of social media to raise awareness around injustices, listen to those who have been harmed, and call for communal solidarity in hopes of enacting lasting change. During the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was murdered by a white Minneapolis, MN police officer who dug his knee into Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, silent to Floyd’s cries of “I can’t breathe.” The horrific scene was captured live on the phones of teenagers and shared widely through social media networks. Protests erupted in the United States and in 50 countries internationally as people flooded the streets and social media platforms. Sikhs came together to proclaim that “Black Lives Matter” [#SikhsForBlackLives] due to the global pandemic of white supremacy. In this context, Jagmeet Singh, now a Member of Parliament, put forth a motion to address systemic racism in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force and direct funds to health care. It was rejected by an MP, whom Singh then referred to as “racist” causing Singh’s removal from the House of Commons for that day. A clip of the press conference after the incident posted on his Instagram page @JagmeetSingh went viral with over two million views.

People see racism as not a big deal, see systemic racism and the killing of Indigenous people as not a big deal, see Black people being the subject of violence and being killed as not a big deal, and in the moment, I saw the face of racism. That’s what it looks like when someone dismisses the reality that people are going through (June 17, 2020).

(www.instagram.com/p/CBj6vAOnIxJ/)

From these examples, we see the ways in which Sikh values and practices can be enlivened within one’s everyday life and interactions, whether they be in physical, virtual, political, or private spaces. They guide people to walk the sword’s edge as sage-warriors who see, think, and act through a state of love as they stand against injustices for the temporal and spiritual sovereignty of all (*miri-piri*). Such an orientation to life allows for conscious, courageous, compassionate action guided by these principles, even in politically precarious contexts.

In the first week of June 2020, while the Black Lives Matter protests were ongoing, Sikhs also commemorated the thirty-sixth anniversary of the atrocities of Operation Blue Star 1984 by posting stories on social media platforms with the hashtag #neverforget1984, which began trending on Twitter (June 1–8, 1984, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to attack the Golden Temple, killing hundreds of Sikhs in their place of worship). In response, Indira Gandhi’s Sikh bodyguards assassinated her, causing the Indian National Congress to target, torture, and kill Sikhs in Delhi Nov 1–4, 1984. The three-day pogroms killed thousands of Sikhs and caused a wave of Sikh migration from India to the diaspora. On June 1, Lilly Singh [@lilly], comedian, talk show host, and YouTube celebrity, posted about the 1984 pogroms that killed thousands of

Sikhs to her 9.5M Instagram followers. The next day, #Sikh was disabled on Instagram and Facebook raising many questions around censorship and surveillance within ethno-religio-nationalist contexts. Poet @rupikaur tweeted about the censorship to her over 245K followers and received a response from head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri [@mosseri]: “Not sure how the #Sikh hashtag ended up blocked. It’s now unblocked on Instagram, we are working to unblock it on Facebook and we’re investigating why this happened” (Twitter June 3, 2020). (<https://twitter.com/mosseri/status/1268238344787394563>)

The #Sikh censorship was called out on social media by Sikh celebrities, activists, advocacy groups, and reported by mainstream media. In World News *ThePrint* by New Delhi journalist Taran Deol noted that “this isn’t the first instance of Facebook censoring content. It has blocked content such as anti-Trump ads while Instagram has done so recently with posts related to the #BlackLives-Matter movement” (June 4, 2020). While social media may afford greater discursive agency that liberates subaltern voices from their historical silencing by dominant narratives, it is simultaneously ensnared within those same systems of oppression by those who own and control the means of production and what agendas they are driving or suppressing. Nevertheless, Sikh influencers continue to harness their social media platforms urging people to fight injustice by calling out the insidious nature of white supremacy, coloniality, and its concomitant religio-ethno-national narratives that perpetuate social inequality and are at the root of hate crimes and discriminatory policies affecting global Sikh communities and beyond.

Farmers Protest: Transpersonal Sovereignty and *Seva*

In 2020 Indian farmers in Punjab and Haryana began protesting laws implemented by Prime Minister Modi that deregulated the agricultural sector without protections for farmers, giving control of India’s food supply to corporations. The protest became one of the world’s longest and largest with over a million on the ground in India peacefully protesting for over a year, calling for food sovereignty and an end to privatization, corporatization, and authoritarianism. The Indian government responded by blockading and destroying roads, cutting off supplies, using water cannons and tear gas against protesters, imprisoning activists, and resorting to other forms of cyber-violence such as spreading propaganda, hate speech, and cyber-harassing those who spoke in support of farmers.

Sikhs and other allies of the Farmers Protest took to social media to raise awareness around the injustices on the ground, support humanitarian aid [@Khalsa_Aid], and organize *langars* to feed and serve those in need. In addition to serving food, different types of “langars” offered oxygen, water, blankets, and books (www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-feeding-the-farmers-how-langars-became/401641). Sikhs called for the freedom of political prisoners such as Nodeep Kaur [#FreeNodeep], a young Dalit Worker Union activist, and Disha Ravi [#FreeDishaRavi], a 21-year-old climate activist arrested under India’s Unlawful Activities Act and Anti-Terrorism Act for tweeting a “Farmers Protest Toolkit” via Google Docs. The Farmers Protest gained international support and the Indian government’s condemnation when Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg [@gretathunberg] retweeted the same “Farmers Protest Toolkit” (<https://twitter.com/gretathunberg/status/1356694884615340037?lang=en>) and Caribbean-American singer Rihanna [@rihanna] tweeted “Why aren’t we talking about this!? #Farmers Protest” (Feb 2, 2021: <https://twitter.com/rihanna/status/1356625889602199552?lang=en>) to her 100+ million followers. The Indian government subsequently suspended mobile Internet services around the New Delhi capital where protestors were stationed. American lawyer Meena Harris [@meena] (niece of US VP Kamala Harris) responded by tweeting, “We should ALL be outraged by India’s internet shutdowns and paramilitary violence against farmer protestors” (Feb 02, 2021: <https://twitter.com/meena/>

status/1356747965713371138). These tweets of support angered Indian politicians who labelled the tweets of support as “foreign interference” by “propagandists” and “sensationalists” causing nationalist extremists to burn the celebrities’ effigies and send cyber death threats, to which Greta Thunberg replied and Meena Harris retweeted, “I still #StandWith Farmers and support their peaceful protest. No amount of hate, threats or violations of human rights will ever change that. #FarmsProtest” (Feb 04, 2021: <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1357282507616645122>).

The intensity of cyberbullying and harassment during the Farmers Protests uncovered “a network of fake social media profiles of people claiming to be Sikhs, and promoting divisive narratives . . . across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to promote Hindu nationalism and pro-Indian government narratives” (Menon and Carmichael 2021). Benjamin Strick [@bendobrown] investigated the retweeting and linking of fake accounts and hashtags using Twitter’s API (Application Programming Interface). He found that the fake accounts were used to “alter perceptions on important issues around Sikh independence, human rights and values” using “#RealSikh, to endorse and #FakeSikh, to discredit different political viewpoints” (Menon and Carmichael 2021). Some posts received more than 3,000 retweets and 16,000 likes for attacking the motives of diasporic Sikh politicians who supported the protests, labeling them as “Khalistani terrorists” (Ibid).

Journalists covering the protests wrote about the power of alternative media to counter biased narratives (www.thequint.com/podcast/farmers-protest-how-alternate-media-is-dispelling-propaganda). *Indian Times* article “Tractor to Twitter” addressed how “farmers were forced to develop a social media strategy as people opposed to their demands were spreading false news and propaganda online” (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/tractor-to-twitter-how-farmers-developed-their-social-media-plan-to-convey-their-views/articleshow/80075943.cms>). To voice their own narratives, social-media savvy farmers and their allies posted their stories through @Tractor2twitr on Facebook and Instagram live, Twitter, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, with trending hashtags such as #SpeakUpForFarmers. *Kisan Ekta Morcha* (Farmers Unified Protest) created a “digital army” of 40–45 volunteers with IT backgrounds coordinating the 50 Farmers Protest groups to defend the movement online, garnering over one million subscribers on YouTube and over 300,000 Facebook followers (Ananth Jan 03, 2021). They successfully offered authentic, trustworthy, and effective content because it came directly from the lived experiences on the ground and offered nuanced narratives from diverse voices outside of nationalist propaganda efforts to label them as terrorists. Artists and their music videos were crucial in the endeavor to “express farmer’s anguish . . . inform, educate, and entertain the viewer” (Ibid.). By harnessing the power of art, music, and storytelling through social media networks, diverse minoritized identities within the Farmers Protests were given a voice, including women and Dalits, representing a more inclusive revolution (Dhami 2022 and Malika Kaur 2020).

Sangati: Sikh Youth – An Inclusive Revolution

Sikh youth – Indian, transnational, and diasporic – many born as digital natives, continue to build solidarity networks through social media in recognition of their own diverse subjectivities as liminal, precarious, hybrid, and uncontained. They are using social media to mobilize across borders, beyond a “homogeneous youth voice,” to “defy established forms of political participation and domination, while seeking out new modes of togetherness and ways of living, in the context of which, calls for social justice are instrumental” (Arora et al. 2013: 274). Sikh youth have begun questioning who is authorized to represent Sikhi because “the dilemmas of being Sikhs in a mediated public space point to a tension-filled tight-rope scenario, whereby each step is scrutinized lest they fall off from the higher ideals of Sikhism” (Mehta 2013: 76). Recognizing the colonial and religio-national

implications on Sikh religious authority and representation, “members of virtual communities, instead of turning to the meta-narrative, be that the Akal Takht, the SGPC, or gurdwara administrations for validation, are exploring the multitude of truths readily available to them . . . rooted in their own tradition . . . in essence then, revival and renewal has gone virtual” (Jakobsh 32).

Young Sikhs are on social media deeply interrogating the entrenched biases and abuses in their own communities and families, sharing their own stories of racism, sexism, homophobia, casteism, and sexual abuses, encouraging conversations to continue at the dinner table with family and friends. They have begun to host public and private conversations on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, and WhatsApp to declare their support for Black Lives Matter [[@Sikhs4BlacLives](#)] and for queer Sikhs [[@SarbatLGBTSikh](#)] offering safe spaces to share experiences and support through virtual meetups and WhatsApp groups. The podcast Kaur Voices [[@KaurVoices](#)] hosted by Jasvir Kaur Rababan livestreams interviews with Sikh and BIPOC activists, scholars, and practitioners to “build safe spaces, free of judgement and prejudice, where real life stories and issues can be shared,” also launching the campaign [#METOOSIKH](#) to “break the silence on sexual violence” inviting “Sikhs around the world to create space for victims and demand safeguarding in our community leadership. Raise your voice with us to make our homes, communities, and Gurdwaras safe!” ([www.kaurvoices.org](#)). Second generation 3HO Sikhs gather on Zoom and in private Facebook forums to address the sexual abuse some experienced by their teacher Harbhajan Singh Yogi Ji and the harm they experienced being sent to boarding school in India at young ages, asking for acknowledgement and accountability. These spaces opened wider calls for restorative justice, to uphold Sikh values, and end exclusionary practices rooted in white supremacy and heteropatriarchy by advocating for marriage equality [[@3HOSikhMarriageEquality](#)] and compassionate reconciliation.

Virtual spaces offer unique platforms to share stories and process experiences, reconnect and redefine individual and communal identity, share resources, promote scholarship, and debate entrenched belief systems to liberate *Sikhi* from coloniality. At the same time, these very spaces can be toxic and damaging for Sikhs and other marginalized bodies where “rituals of inclusion and exclusion manifest through member websites, forums, discussion groups” in which social dramas can play out creating “(sub)cultures and complex prestige systems” (Lysloff 2003: 257–258). Many continue to experience virtual violence through direct instances of cyber abuse and bullying as well as indirectly through the mediation of communal memory of trauma. In her own work, Conerly Casey found that youth were particularly affected where “the affective, bodily distress of such media sensoria and interactions, alongside social conflicts, became so debilitating that youths tended to fluctuate between obsession with broadcast and social media, or complete withdrawal from it” creating a unique form of trauma “living with multiple, amplifying forms of violence across spatiotemporalities, and new forms of agency” (161). Because of this, youth are turning to “a combination of online health seeking, religiosity and spiritual renewal to regain ‘balance’ and community” (Casey 2019: 161). Mental health, spiritual renewal, and community support is offered through Sikh individuals and organizations: [@NanakNaam](#), [@AmarAtmaCoaching](#) [@Sikhnet](#) [@KaurLife](#) [@SikhRi](#) [@SikhHelpline](#) [@BasicsofSikhi](#) [@SikhAwarenessSociety](#) [@UnitedSikhs](#) [@JakaraMovement](#) [@SikhDharmaInternational](#).

Sevadari, Sangati, and Sant-Sipahi: Towards a Balanced Social Economy

Virtual social networks have the transformative potential to liberate *Sikhi* from majoritarian control, allowing Sikhs to express their unique identities, giving them agency in their own self-representation. While these spaces create openings for diverse expressions of Sikh identity, praxis, and sovereignty, they are also subject to gatekeeping by religious, national, and corporate authorities. By

facilitating communication and exchange through virtual spaces, Sikhs can experience, acknowledge, and come to appreciate the multiple expressions of Sikh values and identity. They can create communal networks and transform authoritarian paradigms through engaged encounter with *Sikhi* in everyday life.

As Sikhs move forward into highly mediated and commodified virtual worlds, it becomes important to be aware of the narcissistic implications of operating within a technosphere fueled by attention-seeking algorithms and overconsumption (*bazaari*). To disrupt ego-driven, oppositional (*haumai*), and assimilationist (*darbari*) engagement, an ethical orientation to GurSikh knowledge and praxis (*nirankari*) allows for the creation of conscious community (*sangati*) by serving those in need (*sevadari*).

Using a Sikh ethical lens to address the future productive possibilities of social virtual media landscapes, we see how they can provide a living encounter with multiple dimensions of the transnational, transtemporal, and transpersonal Sikh body (*Guru Panth*). Through diverse modes of engagement with the pluriversal perspectives in Sikh teachings (*Guru Granth*), virtual encounters have the potential to transform Sikh subjectivity altogether (Khalsa 2014). In virtual spaces, “the idea of the individual changes when the body loses its role or meaning” (Rokeby 1995: 156). Questions of individual-communal, spiritual-temporal agency, authority, and sovereignty become complicated as they cross the boundary of the physical body, between form (*sargun*) and formless (*nirgun*), through “affect, emotion, perception and memory” (Casey 2019: 157).

Today as Sikhs spend more of their lives in virtual spaces, they are confronted with a crucial choice to either allow the “momentum of technological development” to mirror the “momentum of our own frustrated desires” (Rokeby 155), whereby we become more disconnected from ourselves, communities, and bodies. Or we can regain harmony with our internal and external ecologies (*sahej*) by embracing a transpersonal sovereignty (*santi-sipahi*) that sees no stranger or enemy because we are all interconnected (*Ik Oankar*).

References and Further Readings

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PART X

Education



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SIKH SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIES IN ENGLAND

Prabhjap Singh Jutla

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to trace the emergence of Sikh schools in England from the early voluntary aided (VA) schools of the early 1990s through to the free schools that were formed following the Academies Act of 2010. The chapter will explore the aims, educational approach, Sikh values, and attainment of the following Sikh Multi Academy Trusts (MAT): Guru Nanak Sikh Multi Academy Trust (GNSMAT), Nishkam Schools Trust (NST), Khalsa Academies Trust (KAT), and Sevak Schools Trust (SST). In addition, the chapter will also provide an overview of pre 2010 Independent Sikh Schools and various Sikh Primary Schools which opened following the Academies Act of 2010. It is argued that in their first decade, Sikh schools in England created a safe environment for the social and emotional growth of Sikh children, who can thrive as active citizens in ever-changing world in which their educational attainment has steadily improved.

The Formation of Sikh Schools in the 1990s

Prior to the launch of the Big Society and the free schools movement in 2010, there were only two Sikh schools in the UK. The most well-known of these has been the Guru Nanak Sikh College, which was established in Hayes, Middlesex, in 1993 as an independent school, which meant that it was not part of the state-maintained sector. The college then joined the state-maintained sector in 1999 and split into two, forming the Guru Nanak Sikh Primary School and the Guru Nanak Sikh Secondary School. These two new schools were voluntary aided (VA) schools. VA schools have a long history in England, dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. Almost all VA schools have a religious character and are funded by the state. However, the state only funds part of the capital costs of VA schools, with the remainder (at least 10%) being funded by the trust or foundation backing the school (GOV.UK 2014). In return, VA schools have considerable autonomy over the curriculum taught, staffing and student admission policies. Following the passage of the Academies Act in 2010, the secondary school converted to academy status, which meant that the school could make use of its previous performance data, which was very strong. The primary school converted to academy status in 2012 and duly merged with the secondary school to form the Guru Nanak Sikh Academy (GNSA), which exists today. In September 2013,

GNSA was joined by Nanaksar Primary School, which opened with four reception classes on the same campus in Hayes and has since continued to grow (www.schoolguide.co.uk, 2013–2020). All schools within the Guru Nanak Sikh Multi Academy Trust follow the National Curriculum, leading on to GCSE qualifications in Key Stage 4 in years 10 and 11 (aged 15 and 16), followed by A-levels in the Sixth Form (aged 17 to 18). Notably, the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) is the benchmark school leaving qualification in England and Wales. The General Certificate: Advanced Level (A-level) is the most popular post-GCSE academic pathway to higher education in England and Wales. Most A-levels are taught in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, or colleges of further education.

As the name suggests, GNSA is part of the Nanaksar movement, which emerged in early twentieth century Punjab and is one of several Sant movements in modern, global Sikhism. The chair of the governing body is Baba Amar Singh, who was a close devotee of Baba Isher Singh of the Nanaksar movement in Punjab and who has been residing in the UK since the early 1970s. According to the organization Nanaksar Darbar,

The main objective of Baba Amar Singh Ji's life is to link the Sikh Sangat with formal education and Sikh religious knowledge. . . . In the UK and in other western countries, parents are losing control over their children who are falling victims to drug abuse having abandoned their social, cultural and religious values. Baba ji has got a clear vision to open more and more educational institutions and to encourage various community development programmes in India as well as overseas. By so doing, Baba Ji is trying to link the new generation which seems to be straying away from its culture and tradition, back to the mainstream.

(Nanaksar Darbar 2021)

Clearly, there is a strong missionary zeal to the educational work of Baba Amar Singh in that potentially lapsed Sikhs can be saved from social evils and welcomed back into the Sikh fold, albeit with a Sant twist. This is reflected in student composition where 75% of the 1,700 strong student body at GNSA are Sikhs, while 25% are non-Sikhs (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Guru Nanak Sikh Academy, 11 June 2019: 1).

In practice, the day-to-day religious ethos of GNSA is more in line with mainstream Sikhism with its emphasis on the Guru Granth Sahib as the *only* Guru and source of legitimate authority of the Sikhs, the *equality* of all, and the Khalsa as the *preferred* form of Sikh identity. This Sikh ethos is embedded in the school day, during which

all pupils are taught a weekly lesson of Sikh studies which includes religious education. Assemblies play an important part in developing the ethos and community spirit within the school. They are broadly Sikh but include stories and messages from a wide range of cultures, religions and faiths.

(Guru Nanak Sikh Multi Academy Trust 2021)

The values of the school are imparted through the acronym SHARE, which underpin lessons, behavior, and interactions between students, staff, and parents. SHARE stands for service to others, humility, achievement, respect, and equality (Guru Nanak Sikh Multi Academy Trust 2021). This humbling yet empowering Sikh ethos was also picked up by Dr. Kanwaljit Kaur (Lady Singh), deputy director of the NSO, who oversees the religious inspections of most Sikh schools. In her inspection report dated June 11, 2019, Lady Singh discussed how GNSA had embedded the teaching of other faiths very well into its curriculum along with substantial work in promoting fundamental

British values. Moreover, collective worship in school was having a noticeable impact on the social, cultural, moral, and spiritual development of all students. According to Lady Singh:

Collective Worship (CW) is a spiritually uplifting experience for all members of the school community and stands at the very centre of school life. Pupils use the school Gurdwara, and the young pupils of Year 1 and Year 2 were observed leading the whole service with great confidence and reverence. They sang shabads, did the Ardass and read the hukam from the Guru Granth Sahib independently. Pupils recite the first eight pauris of Japji Sahib from memory, play the tabla and harmonium and do kirtan. They did the Ardass from memory and read the hukam from the Guru Granth Sahib, with no help from the adults. This reading of the hukam by very young pupils is a real achievement, an improvement from the previous inspection.

(Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Guru Nanak Sikh Academy, 11 June 2019: 3)

Lady Singh had also reported similar experiences when observing Nanaksar Primary separately in 2016, particularly in relation to children in years “taking the service with super efficiency and competency” (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Nanaksar Primary School, 29 February 2016: 3).

Whilst GNSA has been rated as “Good” by Ofsted since July 2014, GCSE results have been well above national averages. Currently, GNSA Secondary’s pre-COVID Progress 8 score from the GCSE exams of 2019 was 0.7, which was well above the national average, placing the school in the top 14% nationally (Gov.uk 2019). Notably, the Progress 8 measure was introduced by the DfE in 2016 and seeks to measure a student’s progress in secondary school compared with their starting point upon leaving primary school. For example, if a school has a Progress 8 score of 0.25, this would mean that, on average, students in this school achieved a quarter of a grade more than other pupils nationally with similar starting points. GNSA Primary fared less well before the pandemic in that its progress scores for reading and writing in 2019 were at -0.3 and -0.2 respectively, and therefore, in line with national averages (64% to 67% of English schools). However, in maths, GNSA Primary’s progress score was an exceptional 4.5, compared to a local average of 1.0 across the Hillingdon Borough, placing GNSA Primary in the top 10% of primary schools in England for progress in maths (Gov.uk 2019). Nanaksar Primary had no students at the end of Key Stage 2 for that academic year (Gov.uk 2019).

Similarly, the Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College in Chigwell (GGSKC), Essex, was established as an independent all-through school in 1993 catering for the needs of 4- to 18-year-olds. The school is non-selective and accepts children of all faiths and none. The school is quite small and currently follows the National Curriculum, including GCSEs and A-levels. The school was consistently rated as “Outstanding” by Ofsted until September 2017, when it was rated as “Inadequate.” According to the head teacher, Mr. Amarjit Toor, in his message to parents dated June 2018:

We were madly focused on helping individual children and getting the best results in their education and outcomes, where Ofsted accepted these to be of a “good” standard. We took our eyes off some other “Independent School Standards” and were given a poor grade.

(Toor, June 2018)

The school remained inadequate for some time before it was rated as “Good” by Ofsted in December 2019, who commented that “the school has improved strongly” and that “[p]upils and students

told inspectors that there was almost no bullying, because the school is like a family” (Ofsted, 10–12 December 2019: 2). GGSKC has a strong Sikh ethos. All the world religions are taught, and two daily acts of worship are embedded into the school day, including use of the gurdwara, in which students lead religious services with very little support from adults (Ofsted, 23–24 February 2012: 5). When visiting the school in February 2012, Ofsted were impressed by how “pupils show great reverence, listening to their peers’ singing of *śabads* (hymns) and reading from the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh scriptures). The whole ethos is spiritually uplifting. Pupils are reminded about their moral duties of good living and *sewa* (serving others) through the religious teachings” (Ofsted, 23–24 February 2012: 5). In terms of academic attainment, GGSKC’s GCSE and A-level results have consistently been above national averages. For example, GGSKC’s pre-COVID Progress 8 score from the GCSE exams of 2019 was 0.96, which was well above the national average (Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College 2019: 1). Except for A-level Economics, the A-level and BTEC pass rate was 100%, which again is well above national averages (Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College, August 2019).

An Overview of Contemporary Sikh Educational Trusts in England

Most Sikh schools and academies in the UK are free schools, which were approved by the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010 to 2015 as part of its Big Society plan (The Conservative Party 2010: 50–54). Led by David Cameron, the coalition government launched the Big Society in July 2010, just two months after taking office, to reduce the role of big government in British society and to give more autonomy to local communities (News BBC 2010). To this end, the Academies Act of 2010 was passed, which encouraged schools to break away from Local Authority (LA) control and become academies, where they would have “more control over their curriculum, budget and staffing” (Department for Education 2015). In the case of underperforming schools, which converted to academy status, these would have to seek an academy sponsor “from a wide range of backgrounds including successful schools, businesses, universities, charities and faith bodies,” which would then be committed to improving performance (Department for Education 2015). In response to Coalition policy, Sikh religious groups embraced both volunteerism, which had a rich history in Sikhism and the opportunity to establish educational trusts, leading to the formation of Sikh Free Schools.

The Nishkam Schools Trust

By far the most successful Sikh Schools Trust in the UK is the Nishkam Schools Trust (NST), which is sponsored by the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jatha (GNNSJ) based in Handsworth, Birmingham. The GNNSJ’s origins can be traced to Sikh migrants in British East Africa in the early twentieth century were led by the charismatic Sant Puran Singh, whom followers accept as their first spiritual leader. The third and current spiritual leader of the GNNSJ is Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh, whose vision led to the formation of the NST, of which he is also the Patron. The various Nishkam Schools are not faith schools as such but, rather, multi-faith schools with a Sikh ethos. Notably, the new post-2010 faith schools in England have either of two designations: faith school or ethos school. The former follows the tenets of a recognized faith and is subject to a Section 48 Faith Inspection by the DfE in consultation with the recognized religious authority of the school. The latter offer an “ethos” and, therefore, are not allowed a distinctly religious character. The best example of this type of school is the British Sikh School now known as the Khalsa Academy, Wolverhampton, who do not provide instruction in Sikh teachings but have offered programs in Sikh History. NST schools are unique in that they are ethos schools that provide a “multi-faith”

education around a shared “spiritual space” as opposed to a conventional gurdwara. This approach to embracing a plurality of faiths in daily educational practice grew from the long-term effects of a multiculturalism, which talked about difference without really understanding or engaging the other in any meaningful way. In the words of Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh in the first volume of *Nishkam Schools Journal*:

In an increasing small world where difference has become divisive; through a lack of understanding a knowledge of the other's viewpoint, the NST vision endeavors strongly to do the very opposite, where commonality is recognized, and difference celebrated through understanding.

(Singh B. S., July 2014: 4)

The NST vision for education sought to rectify and overcome years of neglect, which had relegated learning about and from the wisdom of the other, learning about and from religion. In this novel approach to education and religion, the other was placed at the heart of learning, teaching and the experiential aspects of schooling. In the words of Terry Green, who was the first executive principal of the NST,

We seek not just to nurture a single faith but to *encourage and strengthen the individual and personal faith of each and every pupil and adult* within the Nishkam family of schools. We place a considerable emphasis on developing values and character.

(Green, July 2014: 5)

If this new multi-faith approach to education was novel, then the means by which the NST sought to “*strengthen the individual and personal faith of each and every pupil and adult*” widened the definition of multiculturalism further.

The faith journey upon which students and staff embark in NST schools incorporates teachings from all the world's faith traditions, cultures, and scriptures, allowing for the awakening and development of spiritual growth. At the heart of all NST schools lies the “spiritual space,” where all students and staff “sit together on the same level and observe or participate in prayer and reflection from different traditions” (Rose, July 2014: 19). Modelled on the architecture of the holiest Sikh shrine, *Darbar Sahib* (the “Golden Temple”) in Amritsar, one must step down into the “spiritual space” due to its location just below the ground floor of the school complex, signifying that one must at first show humility before engaging in prayer and reflection. This active approach to prayer and reflection was rooted in the traditions and personal experiences of *seva* (selfless service) and the interfaith work of the GNNSJ and its members. Indeed, the motto of the NST, which adorns its crest is “*Man Neeva Mat Uchi*” (humble the mind to become wise), which is drawn from the Sikh *ardas* prayer that concludes religious services.

This ethos is practiced through the development of what NST has called “Moral Dispositions” in each pupil and teacher. Initially numbering 24, these dispositions now number no less than 50. Originally designed by GNNSJ in order to embed character building in religious education (RE) lessons across Birmingham through the local authority's (LA) Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) program in RE, the 24twenty four Moral Dispositions were embedded into learning objectives for all subjects across the Nishkam curriculum and also through a bespoke program called Faith Development, which is compulsory for all students.

There is a clear correlation between the multi-faith approach towards character-building and academic attainment at the Nishkam Schools. The vast majority of NST schools hold the highest

Ofsted rating of “Grade 1: Outstanding” (Gov.uk 2021). Pre-COVID data from the summer 2019 exams is very positive. At Nishkam Primary School Birmingham, progress scores for reading, writing, and maths were 0, 0.4, and 1.4 respectively, with only the latter coming under the “above average” category, placing the school in the top 11% in England for progress in maths (Gov.uk 2019). Nishkam Primary School Wolverhampton had no students at the end of Key Stage 2 for that academic year (Gov.uk 2019). The GCSE results for Nishkam High School Birmingham were “well above average” in the top 14% nationally as students there achieved a Progress 8 score of 0.99, which meant that GCSE students were just 0.01 points shy of achieving a whole grade above in each GCSE subject compared to similar students nationally (Gov.uk 2019). At Nishkam School West London, the progress scores for reading, writing, and maths in the Primary Phase were -0.4, 0, and 2.5 respectively, with only the latter coming under the “above average” category, placing the school in the top 11% in England for progress in maths (Gov.uk 2019). The secondary phase had no students at the end of Key Stage 4 (GCSE) for that academic year (Gov.uk 2019).

The Khalsa Academies Trust

The West London team behind the Khalsa Academies Trust (KAT) has a history going back to the early 2000s when it first began to canvass for a Sikh school in Slough. The Khalsa Secondary School (KSA) was opened in 2013 as a Free School in Stoke Poges, South Buckinghamshire. The Khalsa Academy, Wolverhampton (TKAW), which was originally opened as a secondary free school called The British Sikh School (TBSS). Finally, Atam Academy, was opened in Romford, Essex, as all-through free school in 2016. The last two schools were the product of the efforts of local Sikhs who then sought the sponsorship of KAT in order to strengthen their case with the DfE. The mission statement of KAT is “Our aim is to provide inclusive outstanding schools based on Sikh values which inspires our students to excel both academically and spiritually and to serve humanity” (Khalsa Academies Trust 2021).

Nick Singh Kandola, co-founder and Trustee of KAT identified three major drivers in the demand for Sikh schools, two of which he felt Sikh schools could do more to cater for. Firstly, Sikh schools have started to deliver classes on Sikh teachings or *Sikhi*, Punjabi language, Sikh devotional music or *gurbani*, and Sikh history, which marks a positive new beginning. Secondly, there are still a number of Sikh parents who choose to move to be closer to Sikh schools “in order to stop their child being bullied at school because they were different or wanted to keep their hair” (Kandola 2021). This group of Sikh families still require a lot of support from Sikh schools. Thirdly, there is another group of Sikhs who are still reeling from the traumatic events of 1984, which included the storming of *Darbar Sahib* by the Indian Army in June and the anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi and elsewhere in October, following the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in revenge. For this group, maintaining Sikh identity is all-important as “after 1984 [they] decided to remember who they actually were and wanted to teach their children these important facts.” Clearly, finding a safe place to discuss Sikh identity and the traumatic events of 1984 are areas for development in Sikh schools. KAT have adopted a novel approach to the dissemination of Sikh teachings. In addition to the regular use of the gurdwara and formal Sikh worship, including the taking of the *Hukamnama*, daily liturgy, the recitation of *Kirtan*, and the completion of *Ardas*, KAT have encouraged the practical aspects of truthful living as practiced by Guru Nanak and his nine successors. For example, KSA wanted to make use of fields next to the school site in Stoke Poges so that students could be taught how to grow their own wholesome and natural food. A fully

functioning strawberry farm was also envisaged at one point. These initiatives, which go beyond formal education, acknowledge the legacy of Guru Nanak's early Sikh community in Kartarpur based on the principles of *Nam Japna* (meditation on the Divine Name), *Kirat Karna* (honest living through a positive work ethic), *Vand ki Chakna* (sharing with others).

This emphasis on the practicalities of truthful living has had a discernible impact on faith practice across KAT schools. RE lessons tend to follow locally agreed, SACRE syllabi whilst specialist staff have recently been brought in to teach Sikh studies lessons. At Atam Academy, the NSO observed a lot of emphasis on the teaching about ethics, where students are actively taught “how to improve oneself, changing bad habits into good habits” (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Atam Academy., 17 June 2019: 2). Moreover, the NSO found that this teaching “enriches their lives so that they understand what it means to live as a good human being, to live a truthful life and learn the value of integrity,” which again emphasizes the Sikh Gurus’ practice of truthful living (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Atam Academy., 17 June 2019: 2). Observing collective worship in the school gurdwara, Lady Singh commented that “it is spiritually uplifting, where pupils learn to practice singing *shabads* (hymns), listen to the *ardass* and to the *vak*, (reading from the Guru Granth Sahib, a message of the day). They show great reverence throughout the whole service” (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Atam Academy., 17 June 2019: 3). Clearly, KAT speaks to the majority of mainstream Sikhs, who have adopted an aloofness from subgroups traditionally viewed by Sikhs as schismatic groups within the *Panth* or whole Sikh community. In the words of Nick Singh Kandola,

Children are easily influenced, so we as a community must ensure that these groups are stopped, and we teach all of our children to follow mainstream Sikh practises and bring them up with the values that our Gurus have taught us.

(Kandola 2021)

Pre-COVID attainment across KAT schools has been positive. For example, KSA recorded a Progress 8 score of 0.4, which was “above average,” placing KSA in the top 17% of schools in England (Gov.uk 2019). TKAW did not have a formal Progress 8 score as its first cohort of GCSE students passed out at the height of the pandemic in 2020 (Gov.uk 2021). Instead, traditional exams were suspended, and schools were told by the DfE to submit their own internally verified Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs). Similarly, Atam Academy did not have any students at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2019 and, therefore, did not have publishable results (Gov.uk 2021).

The Sevak Schools Trust

The Sevak Schools Trust was formed in Coventry in 2012 and was made up of local Sikh parents, teachers, and businessmen who believed that as Sikhs it was their duty to provide an outstanding education to those who were less well-off in the city. This passion for education and social justice stemmed from the work of those involved with the trust in providing classes on Sikh teachings and citizenship across Coventry gurdwaras for over a decade (Shoker, 15 October 2012). At the heart of their project was the Sikh practice of *seva*, or selfless service. The Trust felt that it was simply unfair that parents from deprived parts of the city either had to pay high fees to private schools or had to move to other affluent areas in order to ensure that their children could access quality education.

Members of the trust felt that students from more deprived areas would benefit from an education based on Sikh teachings with its emphasis on seva, equality, and justice for all. As one member put it,

There are families who can't afford to move, and we believe that the standard of schools available to our children here are still below satisfactory. We want to give these children the opportunity to do well and improve their standard of life.

(Shoker, 15 October 2012)

Seva School opened as all-through school in September 2014, although its primary phase had been in existence before then. Two years after opening, the school was judged by Ofsted to be inadequate and placed in “special measures” in September 2016. According to Ofsted, a lack of vision, a lack of accountability structures, poor communication and obstruction “created rifts, damaged morale and limits everyone’s ability to get on with their work” (Ofsted, 21–22 September 2016: 1). Following several ongoing changes in governance, leadership, and teaching staff, the school finally came out of special measures and ceased to be inadequate in January 2019, earning a grade 3 or “requires improvement” (Ofsted, 15–16 January 2019). This was followed by a successful Section 48 Faith Inspection in which the NSO recognized faith provision in the school to be good (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Seva School, 25 November 2019).

The school’s mission statement is taken from Guru Nanak’s teachings in the *Guru Granth Sahib* that “truth is high, but higher still is truthful living” (The Sikh Gurus and Bhagats 1707: 62). With respect to faith provision, the school is based on the SEVA values of service, excellence, virtues, and aspiration. Every half term is devoted to one of the school’s six virtues of kindness, courage, tolerance, honesty, respect, and responsibility with student-led assemblies and seva studies lessons linked to these values, supported with classroom displays and dedicated reflection areas in all classrooms. The primary phase of the school holds two assemblies per week, which involve learning Japji Sahib, performing kirtan, reciting the Mul Mantra, and teacher instruction on the relevant virtue using Sikh teachings and those of other faiths. The secondary phase has traditionally had one assembly per week, which is student-led and based on a calendar of important Sikh and non-Sikh events. These assemblies usually begin and end with *Waheguru Simran*. Three prayers from the *Guru Granth Sahib* are recited in the morning (*Gurdev Mata Gurdev Pita*), before lunch (*Dada Data Ek Hai*), and at the end of the school day (*Tati Wao Na Lagai*), and all lessons begin and end with the salutation “*Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa! Waheguru Ji ki Fateh!*” All faith assemblies take place in the Divan Hall, which houses the Takht, upon which rests the *Senchi Sahib*, which is one of six divisions of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, for which staff undertake the ceremonies of *Prakash* in the mornings, leading to a *Hukamnama* and *Sukhasan* in the evenings. The school itself has a very relaxing and ambient atmosphere due to gentle variations of *Waheguru Simran* played over the school’s internal speaker system ten hours per day, which has been complimented by many visitors. This paragraph is based on my personal observations drawn from my employment as humanities lead and Section 48 (Faith) lead at Seva School, September 1, 2017, to December 31, 2020. When observing faith provision in the school, the NSO were particularly impressed by how

pupils have very strong understanding of British Values through the teachings of their own Sikh faith. They know what equality means, respect for other religions and cultures. They know how democracy works from their own gurdwaras that are democratic institutions.

(Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Seva School, 25 November 2019)

Improvements to the school and its faith provision have contributed to successful outcomes for students. The school's first set of Key Stage 2 results in 2019 showed that progress scores for reading, writing, and maths were 1.5, 0.3, and 1.6 respectively, with only the latter coming under the "above average" category, placing the school in the top 11% in England for progress in maths (Gov.uk 2019). Unfortunately, the school's first GCSE results in 2020 coincided with the COVID pandemic and, therefore, have not been recorded on Gov.uk for comparison purposes. Nevertheless, the school had a high Progress 8 score of 0.8, which in normal circumstances would have been considered "well above" national average and in the top 14% of schools in England. Only one other secondary school in Coventry outperformed Seva School in its Progress 8 score in 2020, which was quite an achievement given its history.

Sikh Primary Schools in England

There are several stand-alone Sikh primary schools in England that are worth mentioning. These include the Khalsa Primary School, Slough, which opened in 2007, the Khalsa Primary School, Southall, which was established in 2009 and Falcons Primary, Leicester, which opened in 2014.

Khalsa Primary School's ethos is grounded in the Sikh practice of *Nam Japna*, *Kirat Karni*, and *Vand ke Chakna*, which it views as "the three pillars" of Sikhism. In addition, the school website states that "a Sikh must always be armed with the following virtues: 1. *Sach* (truth), 2. *Santokh* (contentment), 3. *Daya* (compassion), 4. *Nimrata* (humility), 5. *Pyaar* (love)" (Khalsa Primary School, Slough, 2017–2021). In a departure from other Sikh schools, the school held a series of Military Activity Days (MAD) with the aim "to bring children together through communication tasks, increase their confidence by challenging them with team tasks, unlock leadership skills through problem solving and installing core values such as: Discipline, Respect, Courage and Kindness" (Khalsa Primary School Slough 2021). The school has its own gurdwara supported by a Chaplain who instructs pupils how to recite *Shabads* from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. When inspecting the faith provision of the school, the NSO were impressed by the fact that "all staff and pupils regardless of their faith and belief attend the prayers and say that their own faith is enriched by the opportunities to pray and reflect on the teachings contained in the *Guru Granth Sahib*." Furthermore, "pupils say that the best thing they like about the school is the opportunity to visit the gurdwara as one remarked, 'this has helped me to improve as a person. I am a happy human being'" (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Khalsa Primary School, Slough, 13 March 2017: 4). The school's pre-COVID progress scores for reading, writing, and maths were 2.6, 1.0, and 2.1 respectively, placing the reading and maths scores in the "above average" category while the writing score was merely "average." The school has been designated as "Outstanding" by Ofsted for some time.

The website of Khalsa Primary School Southall states that "the principles of Sikhism inform everything we do," and like its namesake in Slough, these principles are based on the Sikh practice of *Nam Japna*, *Kirat Karni* and *Vand ke Chakna* (Khalsa VA Primary School 2021). The school is voluntary aided, which as discussed earlier, means that it receives partial state funding and further funds from a charitable foundation. Children at the school are taught the national curriculum but are also taught Sikh studies based on "learning about the major figures, stories and morals from our past which are kept alive by Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji" and participate in celebrations throughout the year in which they "are able to perform seva such as reading *Hukumnama* or *Ardas* as part of celebrations which include the whole school community" (Khalsa VA Primary School 2021). When inspecting the school's faith provision, the NSO praised what young school children were capable of in the school gurdwara. In the words of Lady Singh, "The quality of collective worship is outstanding.

Pupils lead the whole service. They recite the first five *pauris* of Japji Sahib, say the Ardas, and read the Guru Granth Sahib for taking the *vak*, the message of the day.” Furthermore, “The message was explained to pupils in English. It is spiritually uplifting to see young pupils performing this with confidence showing great ability” (Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report: Khalsa Primary School, Southall, 17 June 2019: 3). The school’s pre-COVID progress scores for reading, writing, and maths were 0.6, 1.5, and 2.9 respectively, placing reading and writing in the “average” category with maths being “above average” (Gov.uk 2019). The school is recognized by Ofsted to be a “good” school (Ofsted 2018).

Falcons Primary School defines its Sikh character in the following way:

The school draws on the teaching of the Sikh faith and is committed to providing not only an academic education, but one that will also encompass an underlying message of unity, equality and respect. High morals, discipline, love, compassion and selfless service towards all regardless of faith, gender or colour. Falcon School will embrace a universal, inclusive approach to spirituality.

(Falcons Primary School 2021)

In its collective worship policy, which is available on its website, the school places a lot of emphasis on simple meditation techniques for children so that they can improve levels of concentration, focus and attention, allowing for greater resilience. Children have faith assemblies every week, which is led by an adult whilst a period is spent every day in class or as a collective devoted to meditation. In addition, the school celebrates the following festivals from across the world’s religions: *Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s Gurburab, Vaisakhi, Diwali, Bandi Chhor Divas, Christmas, Easter, Eid, Ramadan and Hanukkah* (Falcons Primary School 2019: 4–5). When inspecting the school’s faith provision, the NSO felt that the school was very adept at promoting equality and diversity. According to Lady Singh,

Equality and diversity is the strength of the school and as pupils commented “we like learning about our Sikh religion and our friends” religions. Pupils had the opportunity to take part in an interfaith day at County Hall. For this celebration, pupils from different local faith-based schools celebrated the contribution of World War 1 soldiers.

(Kaur-Singh OBE, Network of Sikh Organisations Statutory Inspection of Sikh Schools Report, 28 February 2017: 4)

The school’s pre-COVID progress scores for reading, writing, and maths were –1.3, –1.2, and 1.6 respectively, which meant that it was “average” across all three key performance indicators (KPI). The school was recognized by Ofsted as being a good school in 2017 (Ofsted 2017).

Conclusion

It seems that Sikh schools are well on the way to boosting academic attainment among British Sikhs. It is likely that over the next decade, the percentage of Sikhs reporting their highest level of educational attainment as degree or equivalent will increase whilst the percentage of those reporting no qualifications will decrease. Attainment in maths is above or well above the national average in Sikh primary schools. Attainment in reading and writing is only average in Sikh schools, with Khalsa Primary School in Slough being an exception whose attainment in reading was above average. Progress 8 scores are either above or well above average in Sikh Secondary schools. Numerous reports by Ofsted and the NSO paint a very positive picture of Sikh schools,

Table 43.1 Sikh Schools in England. 14.07.20

<i>School</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Sponsoring trust</i>	<i>Opening date</i>	<i>Religious character</i>	<i>Section 5 Ofsted ratings</i>	<i>Section 48 Ofsted ratings (faith)</i>
Atam Academy	Primary Academy Free School	The Khalsa Academies Trust Limited	5th September 2016	Sikh	May 2019: Outstanding	June 2019: Outstanding (NSO)
Falcons Primary School	Primary Academy Free School	Akaal Education Trust	27th October 2014	Sikh	September 2017: Good	February 2017: Outstanding (NSO)
Guru Nanak Sikh Academy	All-through Academy Converter	Guru Nanak Multi-Academy Trust	1st November 2010	Sikh	March 2018: Good June 2014: Good	June 2019: Outstanding (NSO)
Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College	All-through Independent	Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College Trust	7th October 1993	None	December 2019: Good September 2017: Inadequate February 2012: Outstanding	N/A
Khalsa Primary School, Slough	Primary Voluntary aided	Slough Sikh School Trust	1st September 2007	Sikh	January 2020: Outstanding October 2011: Outstanding November 2008: Good	March 2017: Outstanding (NSO)
Khalsa Primary School, Southall	Primary Voluntary aided	Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Southall	1st September 2009	Sikh	June 2018: Good July 2013: Good July 2011: Satisfactory	June 2019: Outstanding (NSO)
Khalsa Secondary Academy (Stoke Poges)	Secondary Academy Free School	The Khalsa Academies Trust Limited	5th September 2013	Sikh	December 2019: Inadequate September 2017: Good June 2015: Requires improvement	
Nanaksar Primary	Primary Academy Free School	Guru Nanak Multi-Academy Trust	2nd September 2013	Sikh	June 2015: Good	February 2016: Outstanding (NSO)
Nishkam High School (Birmingham)	Secondary Academy Free School	Nishkam School Trust	31st August 2012	Sikh	April 2014: Outstanding	June 2015: Outstanding (SIFEiNS)

(Continued)

Table 43.1 (Continued)

<i>School</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Sponsoring trust</i>	<i>Opening date</i>	<i>Religious character</i>	<i>Section 5 Ofsted ratings</i>	<i>Section 48 Ofsted ratings (faith)</i>
Nishkam Nursery (Birmingham)	Nursery Childcare on Non-Domestic Premises, Full day care	Guru Nanak Nishkam Education Trust	8th September 2009	N/A	September 2017: Good March 2014: Good November 2013: Requires improvement October 2013: Requires improvement March 2010: Good	N/A
Nishkam Nursery, Wolverhampton	Nursery Childcare on Non-Domestic Premises	Guru Nanak Nishkam Education Trust	17th September 2015	N/A	November 2016: Good May 2016: Inadequate	N/A
Nishkam Primary School, Birmingham	Primary Academy Free School	Nishkam School Trust	6th September 2011	Sikh	April 2015: Outstanding June 2013: Requires improvement	December 2014: Outstanding (SIFEiNS)
Nishkam Primary School, Wolverhampton	Primary Academy Free School	Nishkam School Trust	2nd September 2013	Multi-faith	February 2020: Good October 2017: Requires improvement June 2015: Requires improvement	N/A
Nishkam School, West London	All-through Academy Free School	Nishkam School Trust	9th September 2013	Sikh	September 2016: Outstanding	July 2017: Outstanding (SIFEiNS)
Seva School (Coventry)	All-through Academy Free School	Sevak Education Trust Limited	1st September 2014	Sikh	September 2016: Inadequate January 2019: Requires improvement	November 2019: Good (NSO)
The Khalsa Academy Wolverhampton	Secondary Academy Free School	The Khalsa Academies Trust Limited	1st September 2015	None	April 2018: Good	N/A

which have been praised for impeccable behavior among students and for garnering respect for others. It appears that Sikh schools have created a safe space for Sikh children to discover themselves and grow, whereas they might have been prone to bullying in the state and private sector due to their look and faith.

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SIKH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

Yamini Agarwal

Introduction

Sikh schools in India and the ideology behind their establishment need to be studied along with the development of Sikhism as a religious philosophy within a changing social and political context. While scant, research on the development of Sikh schools is closely linked to the prominence given to Sikh faith and identity initially in the Panjab province and later across the country and even in the diaspora. In this chapter, I analyze Sikh educational institutions in three significant phases of the community's history – the annexation of the Panjab province in 1849, India's independence in 1947, and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots that subsequently saw a greater emphasis on Sikh identity and establishment of Sikh schools across the country. It is essential to turn to history to explore the trajectory of Sikh education and contextualize the challenges that managements running these institutions currently face. These include the changing demographics of these schools following abandonment by upper and middle class Sikhs and the issues of Sikh identity, multiculturalism, and diversity that have emerged within the institutions.

Historical Evolution of Sikh Education

Education in Gurmukhi was fairly widespread in the Panjab when the British annexed the province in 1849. Students in Gurmukhi schools mainly read religious scriptures and texts in Punjabi, which was taught by a *granthi*. Poetry and music – an essential component of Sikh religious scriptures – was also taught. Historical accounts mention that besides religious scriptures, subjects like arithmetic, basic maths, and history were introduced to students in these schools (Report 1911–12: 26). The schools were open to both male and female students, even though the latter were relatively fewer in number and to all castes and classes. This was in contrast to schools run by the Hindus, which were exclusively for Brahmin students. There are accounts of the existence of similar institutions among other religious communities. Most were located within religious premises/land, like a temple or *gurdwara*. Education had yet to be viewed as a tool of social and political control before the annexation and most of these schools ran in peaceful coexistence with each other.

The British introduced modern education in the province post annexation. Despite the fact that English education was promoted by the colonial government, Sikh elementary schools were

established with grants by local religious organizations at this time. They catered to villages and taught in Gurmukhi. The first Khalsa school (elementary and vernacular) was set up in 1856, and thereafter Sikh schools were also started in Amritsar, Lahore, and Ferozepur (Agarwal 2020). However, the British supported Urdu as the provincial language and also established missionary schools, which offered education in English and subsequent employment in civil areas like bureaucracy and judiciary. As a result, attendance in vernacular schools slowly declined even as they were being established regularly across Panjab (Ibid.).

The 1881 Census registered a sharp fall in the number of Sikhs in the province. This led to the establishment of the Singh Sabha that was constituted to address the issue of Sikh identity and the community started to actively assert itself in building educational institutions (Oberoi 1994). The social and cultural activities of the Singh Sabha members and their attempt to define a monolithic Sikh identity based on outward markers have been well recorded in academic research. One of the outcomes of these activities was the establishment of exclusive schools and colleges for Sikh children, which could inculcate in them identity norms prescribed by the Singh Sabha. Preventing conversion of upper class Sikh students who were attending missionary institutions was one of the main goals of these schools.

Institutions such as Khalsa College, Amritsar, and Panjab University College or Oriental College, Lahore, were setup by the end of the nineteenth century and seen as religious and cultural centers of the Sikhs. The community was seeking to provide modern education in its higher educational institutions – slowly moving towards English as a medium of instruction – to enable its young adults to enter government jobs or join the British Army, which had by then started to support the martial identity of the Sikhs.

Patronized by the British to unite like “other communities for the success of their institutions” during the opening of the Khalsa College in Amritsar, the Sikhs started Khalsa High Schools across Panjab by 1892 and provided textbooks in Punjabi (A History of the Khalsa College 1949). In 1902, the Chief Khalsa Dewan (CKD), the then highest body of the Sikhs, was established, and conferences were held by the Sikh Educational Committee (SEC) in Amritsar. SEC’s goal was to seek funds to establish Sikh institutions and deliberate on ways in which the community could promote a monolithic Sikh identity. This body enforced a “strict way of life” in its schools based upon CKD’s newly charted rules and regulations for the Sikhs (Judge et al. 2010: 353). The colonial government recognized this body as representing the Sikhs, instituted Sikh holidays, and gave a nod to formal teaching of Punjabi in schools based on its recommendations (Ibid.).

By the turn of the nineteenth century, English was taught from Class III in vernacular Gurmukhi schools, whereas it was the sole medium of instruction in Anglo schools throughout the higher classes, making them a preferable option. Around this time, agriculture was introduced as a subject in Sikh vernacular middle schools to attract Sikh students from farming classes. The Quinquennial Report (1911–1912) observed,

Education amongst the Sikhs is making very rapid strides. The community is prosperous and has realised the necessity for education even for military career, and they especially excel in engineering. At the present rate of progress they will soon more than make good the leeway which they have allowed to hamper their success in Government service and the learned professions.

Vernacular Gurmukhi schools were increasing in number. The report further observed, “The number of Gurmukhi-teaching schools for boys, however, increased from 32 to 102, and the attendance from 917 to 4,067. The increase chiefly took place in the Multan division” (Ibid.). What

this indicates is that the Sikh education network was fragmented but expanding till the first quarter of the twentieth century. The formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC) in 1925 and activities of the SEC kept the idea of Sikh education alive, with underlying commitment to Sikh identity and promoting Gurmukhi in schools.

Sikh Education After 1947

Sikh education, as it was conceived and practiced during colonial rule, saw a significant shift after Indian independence in 1947. The Sikhs had suffered deeply during the Partition of India – thousands were killed, lost their homes and land, and had to start afresh. They were seen as a “loyal” Indian religious minority, but as a community seeking recognition to its distinct identity, it was lost to the ideas of secularism and the larger national identity (Singh 2005). The community was considered a Hindu sect, despite the fact that in 1946 and subsequently in 1950, the SGPC redefined its original formulation of a Sikh and imposed the outward markers of the five Ks (Takhar 2005). The Sikhs struggled to find their distinct identity that would be approved by the post-independent state, which was riding on the principles of secularism, national integration, and economic development.

Sikh-managed schools and colleges continued to be established based exclusively on Sikh ethos. After 1947, the Chief Khalsa Diwan renamed the Sikh Educational Conference as the All India Sikh Educational Conference (AISEC), which established more than 300 educational institutions soon after, with the hope of providing modern education to the community and socialization of Sikh children (Singha 1988).

Besides the preservation of its identity, a challenge for the community was to keep Gurmukhi relevant. By the 1950s, Gurmukhi was losing its importance in education in Punjab, even though it was a spoken dialect. For instance, in the six districts of Jullundur, the spoken dialect of 97.2% people was Punjabi. But the percentage of candidates who appeared in Hindi and Punjabi language exams of the Punjab University between 1950 and 1955 was 62.2% and 37.8% respectively. Of nearly 1.4 lakh students who took the Matriculation examination of Punjab University from 1951 to 1955 and who had the option to answer history and geography papers either in Hindi or Punjabi, only 26.5% wrote in Punjabi (Gupta 1957).

Other social and political changes affected the community as well. The Green Revolution in 1966 led to the emergence of a class of rich peasants that sought advantages that came with English education and civic employment. This class invested in education and participated in community politics in educational institutions. Panjabi University (PU) in Patiala was established in 1962, followed by Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) in 1969, and the issue of class and whom the institutions supported within the community, for instance the Jats or trading castes and their politics, were strong. Besides identity and language, class and caste issues and political leanings among different Sikh groups impacted the educational institutions of the community, specifically in terms of political ideology and numbers.

Most Sikh schools in Punjab and other cities still taught in the vernacular till at least the late 1960s, and English was an additional subject. Few Khalsa schools in Delhi and Bombay started to adopt English as a medium of instruction since they were catering to the urban Sikhs. The schools offered Punjabi as a mandatory curriculum component and promoted Sikh ethos through curricular and co-curricular activities. This was still not done officially but as a gradual shift as the country moved towards urbanization, development of bureaucracy, and sectors such as agriculture and industry. In terms of numbers, between 1947 and 1972, a total of about 430 schools were run by the Sikhs across the country.

A decisive step towards education was taken at the AISEC in 1972, where it declared that Sikh “public” schools will be set up in “great numbers on the line of schools by Christian missionaries but different in ethos” (Singha 1988: 125). This was a call for a complete shift from Punjabi to English as the medium of instruction in Sikh schools. The first such school, namely, Guru Harkrishan Public School, was established in 1965 near India Gate in Delhi. It was followed by the establishment of the chain of Guru Harkrishan public schools in Delhi beginning 1972 under the aegis of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC), followed by the rest of the Punjab and across India. Since DSGMC was under the aegis of the SGPC, all its schools adopted English as an official medium of instruction. The curriculum was revised, and the subjects of Punjabi and Divinity were offered as a compulsory component “for emphasis on Sikh ethics and value system” and “intimate interaction with the community” (Ibid.).

In 1981, the all India literacy rate was about 41%, and of the Sikhs around 40%, with a drop-out rate of above 60% (Census of India 1991). However, while the community was understood to be mainly business oriented, educational and occupational aspirations were growing. The Green Revolution produced a rich class of farmers who

began to look beyond the village . . . Those who benefited from the new technology and generated surpluses did not wish their future generations to continue working in agriculture. Not only did they buy Maruti cars and all possible consumer goods that signified the lifestyle of the urban upper middle classes, but also sent their children to study in the best possible schools that they could afford and encouraged them to find jobs in the towns.

(Jodhka 2001: 1499)

My earlier study on lives of young women survivors of 1984 anti-Sikh violence showed that despite limited means, families were actively strategizing for their children’s education and occupational futures (Agarwal 2017). Their children who were between 11 and 16 years at the time of the riots were studying in government schools and aspired for careers, irrespective of gender. None reported studying in Sikh-managed schools prior to the violence, including their siblings (Ibid.). This is likely because the network of Sikh educational institutions was still fragmented in Delhi, and Sikhs were seen as mainly an agricultural or business community. As the next section will show, the 1984 riots changed the demographics of Sikh-managed schools and higher educational institutions and parents’ educational strategies.

The 1984 Violence and Sikh Schools in Delhi

The 1984 anti-Sikh violence was a watershed moment in the history of the modern Sikh community. The socio-emotional impact on the community, the loss of lives, and livelihood and dropout from schools and colleges of children and young adults who survived but lost families has yet to be fully captured in research. Approximately 3,000 Sikhs died in New Delhi alone. Before the pogroms, years of militancy in Punjab and the rising Khalistan narrative had created an “undemocratic” imagery of the Sikhs who were seen as fighting for separatism and against democratic institutions (Singh 2014).

Before the pogroms, there were about seven schools by the DSGMC in Delhi and nearly 20 across India, including Punjab, but mostly in urban areas. The pogroms disrupted the education of Sikh students, especially those from the working and lower middle classes. The world of possibility that lay ahead of young survivors was shattered. The study I conducted in Delhi sought to capture

the pre- and post-1984 riots educational lives of young women survivors who lost either or both parents in the violence (Agarwal 2014, 2017). It found that all survivors, irrespective of their social class, left schools immediately after the violence of 1984. Some did return to schools, only to leave them within months due to financial or psychological challenges. Girls were either married within a couple of years or stayed at home to look after their younger siblings as their mothers went to work in employment given to them under the various schemes by the Indian government as widows of 1984. The experience in school of the then 12-year-old Gurbir (name changed) who had witnessed the killing of both his parents and was readmitted to a school later is revealing:

I could not focus on studies after '84. I returned to school as a bald boy and my fellow students either used to stare at me or tease me. That would lead to further fights and, after I lost my parents, I had no one to guide me. I became very aggressive and picked up a lot of fights with older boys. I dropped out in Class IX because I could not concentrate on studies. Friends, teachers . . . now I feel everyone was perhaps scared to talk to me because I had become so aggressive.

The experience of Simpreet describes the trauma young survivors had suffered, which was never fully addressed through psychological or counselling support:

I used to sit with books and that day would come to my mind. All those images . . . I could not concentrate anymore. I used to try to study but would break down. So I dropped out in 1986 and was married two months later at the age of 14 years.

Parents who suffered during the violence looked towards schools run by Sikh managements for their children's education. They reported a sense of fear among the community for young children, and Sikh schools were seen as keeping them safe. Evidence from younger siblings of the survivors suggests they too faced hostility and alienation in mixed classrooms after the violence, giving an impetus to the community to search for Sikh institutions. For those survivors who were moved to Tilak Vihar, also known as the Colony of Widows in Delhi, a Sikh-managed school was established only in 1995, 11 years after the violence. By then, many young survivors had already dropped out of schools.

There was also an increased emphasis on Khalsa identity within the community post 1984. The fact that Sikh men and young boys had to cut their hair to save themselves from the rioters, incidents that have been recorded in detail over the years, led the community to reinforce and re-emphasize the importance of outward identity markers. It was in Sikh schools that these identity aspirations could be met. Institutions of the DSGMC made wearing of turban by male students and *salwar kameez* for female students mandatory in its schools after the pogroms. Baptism was encouraged, and cutting hair was totally prohibited. An attempt to do so invited suspension from school. By 2000, there were nearly 15 schools by DSGMC and about 30 others. Schemes such as complete tuition fee waiver and scholarship for baptized Sikh students were also provided in these schools, indicating the attempt to reinforce the normative Sikh identity on students.

Fears of security and bullying in mixed schools as well as changing aspirations are some common psychological responses in post-pogrom situations. Similar observations have been made in the aftermath of other incidents of communal violence. Post the 2002 Gujarat riots, Sheth and Haeems (2006) found that enrolment in Urdu-medium schools increased mainly for two reasons – first, Muslim parents felt that it was safer to send children to schools in Muslim-dominated neighborhoods, and second, that Urdu-medium education could get the children, especially boys, jobs as

religious teachers, including in other countries. Hence, parental strategies changed both out of a sense of insecurity as well as aspirations for better life chances for their children. The spread of Sikh schools after 1984 also reflects similar trends.

The National Policy on Education in 1986 drew attention to the education of religious minorities, though this was mainly in relation to Muslims. Ironically, Sikhs were always seen as having kept at par with other communities in education despite a relatively high school dropout rate (about 60%) and dismal representation in higher education (around 10%) till 1990s. But the policy served as an impetus to the community to focus on building schools, colleges, and technical institutions like ITIs and to provide scholarships to Sikh students to enable their education.

Globalization, Markets in Education, and Sikh Schools

The neo-liberal policies of the government of India since the early 1990s saw the spread of markets in school education. Private schools started to replace what was largely a government provided education, introducing English-medium instruction and upgraded, technology-driven infrastructure. Besides the market in education, India also saw opening up of new sectors in engineering, management, and information technology and influx of multinational corporations, breaking down the traditional occupation structures, with more opportunities emerging in the new, global sectors.

As is typical of market systems, those with better social and economic capitals benefitted from the changed landscape of school education. Ball (2014) mentions,

In choice systems advantage-seeking parents are able to use their relevant capitals to negotiate diverse forms of provision and fuzzy rules of access. In this sense school choice may be considered as a class strategy, a mechanism for reproducing social advantage, a means of “doing” class in a very practical way.

Furthermore, these class strategies are not just local but global, where advantaged parents seek global opportunities or through education enable their children to enter the global labor market (Ibid.).

The sharp class divide in education was most discernible in Sikh schools. Even though Sikh institutions were being established in large numbers, by the end of 1990s, upper and middle class Sikhs started to leave them for reputable public (private) and international schools. Interviews with teachers and management members revealed that parental strategies among Sikhs during this time saw a marked shift towards English-medium education and a market-oriented curriculum that could lead to opportunities in the local and more importantly, global job market. It was these schools that were seen as giving a competitive edge to children of upper and middle-class Sikh parents to acquire the cultural and social capital that could widen their market chances.

There are several reasons for the withdrawal of these classes of Sikh parents from Sikh-managed schools. My interviews (Agarwal 2019) suggest that new private and international schools were providing better infrastructure like classroom facilities, blackboards, sports, etc. and subject choices, including foreign languages and computers, which parents from these classes appeared to prefer. Religious and cultural education was not seen as important within the space of the school. In fact, many upper and middle class parents continue to engage in private tuitions in Punjabi and Divinity at home while their children study in other private schools. By 2000, the migration of Sikhs to countries like the UK, USA, and Canada as well as East and Southeast Asia had also sharply risen. As per Government of India Report 2001 on Indian Diaspora, there were nearly five lakh Sikhs in Britain alone and six out of 100 Indian Sikhs moving were abroad every year mainly for higher education and entering the global labor market. The earlier preference for cultural education and

even safety of Sikh children by parents took a back seat in the face of aspirations for global mobility and acquisition of social and cultural capital through school education.

The aspiration for English-medium education percolated to the lower middle and working classes too, taking the literacy rate of India to 70% by 2001 and of the Sikhs about 69.4%. This in part led to the rise of what are known as low-fee private schools, which are mostly unrecognized and have, over the years, faced criticism over quality of education provided in them. Here one needs to acknowledge the learning opportunities provided by Sikh schools especially to low income parents, mainly Sikhs, but to children from other communities as well. From 1990 onwards, Sikh managements established schools in neighborhoods where Sikhs resided even in small numbers. These were often peri-urban, marginalized, or unauthorized areas, for instance in Delhi, which either had no schools in the vicinity or were breeding grounds for low-fee, unrecognized schools.

One of the Sikh schools in my study was located on Delhi's periphery. Only 5% of its total enrolment of 4,000 students was Sikh. It was among the most popular and sought-after schools in the neighborhood and around, providing an institutional space to students who were often the first-generation in their families to go to school. For the lower-middle and working-class Sikh families in the vicinity, the school's various minority schemes and scholarships to *amritdhari* students were the best option to fulfil the mobility aspirations for their children (Agarwal 2019).

While sweeping generalizations cannot be made, some evidence does suggest that post 2010, many Sikh schools have witnessed a falling number of students from the community. Apart from a few located in prime neighborhoods, Sikh schools have not kept pace with changing educational demands from within the community. The mandatory learning of Punjabi and Divinity, especially in higher secondary classes, also does not go down well with parents who want their children to focus on core subjects, as mentioned to me by parents in the research.

Sikh managements are yet to fully acknowledge the presence of students of other religious backgrounds in their schools and to offer a more inclusive pedagogy. My study (Ibid.) pointed to many conflicts within the institutions emerging from classroom diversity and a lack of dialogue among management and teachers on ways to make the school space more equitable and democratic. Special concessions for baptized students but mandatory wearing of turban and adherence to Sikh identity are also not appreciated by Sikh students and parents themselves. The change of management every four years, as it is an elected body, and factionalism further pose internal challenges for the schools in areas such as teachers' recruitment and decisions on religious and cultural activities in schools, which impact their day-to-day working. There is also a lack of coordination among individual institutions and at the national level on organizational matters such as curriculum, appointment of teachers, etc.

Concluding Comments

By the beginning of 2020, there were close to 90 Sikh-managed primary and secondary schools in Delhi alone that offered Punjabi and Divinity as mandatory subjects. Most of them had been established between 1985 and 2005. They offered fee and other concessions to *amritdhari* students in order to encourage the younger generations to follow their culture. Other special provisions include reservation of 50% seats for students from the community and scholarships, as mandated under minority educational institutions' schemes.

However, the numbers of Sikh students in these schools is dwindling. Parents, especially belonging to upper and middle classes, continue to access other private schools. The attempt to enforce commitment to outward identity markers does not also often find support among Sikh students, who are imagining their futures outside of the boundaries of the schools and in multiple, global contexts. The increasing enrolment of students from different religious backgrounds has also raised

several challenges for both teachers and school managements, especially around subjects such as Punjabi and Divinity and other identity-focused, cultural activities of the schools.

Sikh school managements hence face many dilemmas. How do they remain minority schools when they are forced to give admission to growing numbers of students from other religious backgrounds as economically better off members of the community access different private schools for their children? Does the emphasis on Sikh identity and related activities pose a constraint if the middle- and upper-middle-class Sikh families are to be attracted back to the schools? This predicament is not entirely lost on those at the helm of these institutions. In one of its schools, the management was contemplating to shift to the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum to bring these classes of the Sikhs back. A few such schools have been started in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh that seek to amalgamate Sikh ethos with international curriculum, keeping in mind the global aspirations of the community, especially of rich agriculturalists and businessmen. It is one of the ways in which the diaspora is influencing the educational market for the Sikhs. Qureshi's research (2014) indicates the market of global/international schools mushrooming across Punjab. They offer a mix of national and international curriculum to aspirational classes among the Sikhs, with a promise to enable them to migrate, gain skills for the global labor market or form networks that would serve as channels to the diaspora.

Amid these complex intersections of class, identity, and diaspora, Sikh managements will have to adopt multicultural administrative and pedagogical practices and reflect on the larger goals of what is the rapidly changing context of these institutions. Though some changes in pedagogy and practices have been introduced, these are slow-paced, and the reality of classroom diversity is yet to be institutionally dealt with. The growing cultural and social diversity also raises critical questions and calls for deeper exploration about inclusion in Sikh schools.

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MODERN SIKH STUDIES

Bridging Differences, Opening New Horizons

*Pashaura Singh and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair***Introduction**

The final essay is jointly composed by the editors of this volume, both of whom are uniquely qualified to make a statement on this important topic in the form of a conversation between them. Modern Sikh Studies is an intellectual formation where the social, political, educational, intellectual, and spiritual aspirations of progressive diasporic Sikhs have strongly intersected. Diverging from the conventional 'essay' format of earlier chapters in this volume, this particular chapter adopts a conversational interview format to examine the growth of endowed Sikh Chairs in North America and the controversies and community politics behind these institutional developments. The editors make a strong case for adopting interdisciplinary approaches to keep pace with the developments in the humanities and social sciences and the changing nature of the knowledge system. Drawing upon their different backgrounds and research orientations they aim at showing how alternative approaches can nevertheless work in productive harmony to take the field forward. This dialogue ranges from a discussion about the growing pains of the field in the early 1990s, to its eventual stabilization and importance beyond academia. In many ways this article on endowed Sikh Chairs brings together all aspects of the Sikh World in the sense of creating a real intellectual, cultural, and spiritual bridges between the various Sikh life-worlds (historical and contemporary) as well as the outside world.

What did the field of Sikh studies look like when you got into the field as a graduate student? What motivated you to go into what was a relatively obscure field with few prospects for jobs? What did you hope to achieve?

Pashaura Singh (PS)

The idea of the discipline of Sikh studies emerged with the establishment of Guru Nanak Dev University at Amritsar and Gurmat College as part of the Punjabi University in Patiala. These institutional developments were an integral part of the celebration of Guru Nanak's 500th birth anniversary in 1969. After doing my BSc. at G.H.G Khalsa College Gurusar Sudhar in 1970, I was doing my master's degree in mathematics at Government College Ludhiana. At that time, I had no idea of the field of Sikh studies at all. At the inspiration of my mother, I had learned the reading of the whole *Guru Granth Sahib* when I was in seventh grade at school through proper

santhiā (“Lessons”) at my village Gurdwara at Sudhar from a very learned Granthi Inder Singh, who was well-versed in traditional Sikh scholarship and Persian language. I used to participate in *Akhaṇḍ Paṭh* (“Unbroken reading of the Guru Granth Sahib”) performances at Sikh festivals (*gurpurbs*) celebrating the anniversaries of the Gurus. I had also learned devotional singing (*kīrtan*) at that time. We used to voluntarily participate in all Sikh functions. After winning merit scholarships at middle, higher secondary, and at the university level, I wanted to pursue my career as a teacher in science and mathematics. However, the death of my mother on January 17, 1971, changed my life forever, because she had frequently encouraged me to study the *Guru Granth Sahib* with proper attention in order to understand its deeper meaning. In February of 1971 my schoolteacher Master Ji Jaswant Singh took me to Patiala to meet with Professor Harbans Singh, the editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, who was also a student of my Master Ji at Muktsar in his school days. Professor Harbans Singh inspired me to join Gurmat College at Patiala to pursue my career in the new field of Sikh studies. He prevailed upon me to transfer to Punjabi University, Patiala, and join the college that year. I joined Gurmat College, Patiala, and completed my master’s degree in religious studies in 1973 by winning gold medal by standing first in the university. Thereafter, I joined as a research scholar at Guru Nanak Foundation in New Delhi. However, I was offered a position as the Head of Divinity Department at Guru Harkrishan Public School (India Gate), New Delhi, where I taught Sikh religion and culture to students for seven years from July 1973 to March 1980. In December 1979, I had a meeting with Dr. Gurcharanjit Singh Attariwala, a Canadian ophthalmologist who was visiting India to interview me. He inspired me to move to Calgary (Alberta) and work as a Sikh Granthi at their newly built gurdwara at Guru Nanak Centre as well as a principal of Guru Nanak School to teach Sikh religion and Punjabi language to the new generation of Sikh students. He also promised me that the Sikh Society will help me to join the University of Calgary to pursue my interest in religious studies in a Western university. It was really an attractive offer and I agreed to his proposal. The Sikh Society of Calgary invited me, my wife, and two children to arrive at Baisakhi celebration on April 10, 1980, where my new career began in Canada.

Mrs. Gurdev Attariwala took me to the University of Calgary to meet with Professor Harold G. Coward, head of the Department of Religious Studies. He encouraged me to start taking courses in religious studies as a part-time student. I joined the university in the fall of 1980 to register in the “Conference Course in Textual Studies,” and thereafter, I took several courses in method and theory, along with courses in both Western and Eastern traditions in the coming years. That experience broadened my understanding of different religious traditions. When the new graduate program was introduced in the department in 1984, I was accepted as a graduate student. I completed my master’s thesis on “Sikh Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani” in 1987 under the supervision of Professor Ronald W. Neufeldt. I was then accepted in the doctoral program at the University of Toronto, where I had the opportunity to work with Professor J.S. Grewal, Professor W.H. McLeod, Professor J.T. O’Connell, Professor Willard G. Oxtoby, Professor Paul W. Gooch, Professor Roger O’Toole, Professor J.C. Hurd, Professor C.T. McIntire, Professor Neil McMullin, Professor Don Wiebe, and Professor S. Brown. I completed my doctoral dissertation on “The Text and Meaning of the Adi Granth” under the guidance of Professor W.H. McLeod in 1991. I was the first person to complete a PhD degree in Sikh studies at a Canadian University. I must say that I was able to earn a doctoral degree at the University of Toronto only because an international expert in the field of Sikh studies was available at that time as a visiting scholar for five years. If Professor McLeod had not been available at that time, it would not have been possible for me to complete my degree in Sikh studies. Thereafter, I won a two-year postdoctoral fellowship offered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to work on the project of “Life and Work of Guru Arjan.” Meanwhile, there was an advertisement for the position of a visiting assistant

professor in Sikh studies for five years at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where the local Sikh community had been doing a fund-raising campaign to establish an endowed chair in Sikh studies with the goal of raising \$1.2 million for this purpose. The original target of \$350,000 over a five-year period from the date of the agreement in 1986 was not met; in fact, the initial enthusiasm had significantly dwindled by late 1990. In the beginning of 1991, therefore, the Sikh Studies Association approached the university authorities and suggested a new approach that would make the fund-raising campaign more appealing to the Sikh community. Specifically, they wished to spend the existing funds to appoint a visiting assistant professor for an initial five-year contract. They assumed that once a person has actually begun teaching courses at the University of Michigan, student feedback and community interest would energize potential donors. As part of this new strategy an advertisement was placed, and eventually I was hired in September 1992 for a non-tenure five-year position. In addition to the professional duties incumbent on me, it was hoped that the position would bear fruit, that Punjabi teaching would draw students, and also that the broader Sikh studies would grow out of this initiative. Moreover, it was hoped that I would help, in a number of ways, those who were soliciting funds for an endowed chair for Sikh studies. I served as a foot soldier in this long and painstaking endeavor. In spite of the worldwide controversy over my doctoral thesis (which began in October 1992) fundraising had gone up during a period of five years and the goal of \$1.2 million for a chair in Sikh studies was achieved by the beginning of 1997.

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair (ASM)

That's quite a journey you've narrated. It's interesting to see that you also came from a non-humanities background. Most South Asians at the time would have regarded the switch from science/math to humanities as a kind of death sentence as far as job prospects were concerned. It was certainly the case for me, and my journey into the humanities was not only different from most other scholars in the field, it was also very risky. For a start I didn't even know there was a field called "Sikh Studies." I guess my journey began in the late 1980s when I finished my first PhD in chemistry. Like many of my generation, I was deeply affected by the turmoil in the Sikh world in the aftermath of the events of 1984, as Sikhs were branded as terrorists and Sikhism as a violent religion by the global media. In the UK, immigrant communities (especially Sikhs) had barely gotten past the widespread racial tensions and race riots of the early 1980s. Now, it seemed that what many of us considered a "homeland" was also under threat as religious tensions were rising in Punjab. As I remember, at every job interview, even in the science and engineering sector, the subject of "Sikhs and violence" would come up, and more often than not I felt at a loss for words, concepts, and knowledge needed to explain the situation. So by 1988, even as I was beginning my science career with major multinational companies, I had already begun to read widely in the humanities and trained myself in Sikh thought and Punjabi literature, history, and culture. It certainly helped that I had received a solid (what you might call classical) schooling prior to university, which inculcated a love of reading, literature, and self-reflection. While still in the corporate sector, I began to toy with the idea of having a foot in both worlds – maybe earning my living as a scientist while studying humanities in the evening, with a view (hopefully) to teach and publish in this area. I had read about, and been inspired by, the physicist John Polkinghorne, who turned his attention to theology and wrote profusely about the relationship between science and religion. By 1989, having absorbed a lot of Indian philosophy and influenced by Radhakrishnan's "Eastern Religions and Western Thought," I had decided that I wanted to pursue the study of Sikh philosophy in cross-cultural perspective, although I didn't really know what that meant at the time – it was more of a nebulous feeling that I was drawn to – nor how I should go about studying it. In the UK the resources available to train in the study of Sikhism were very limited indeed. Universities in Punjab were off-limits at the time because of the ongoing

conflict between Sikh militants and the Indian state. And I only knew of two people in the UK specializing in the study of Sikhism. However, that same year, Punjabi University Patiala, started an MA “correspondence course” in the study of Sikh religion and history, which was run by the Sikh Missionary Society in Southall. I interviewed for it and tried out the course, but the standard was barely above A-Level, so I ditched it and began looking at places in the UK where one could study philosophy/religion and somehow tag Sikhism onto it. By late 1990, however, I moved out of the corporate sector and took up an SERC postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Warwick to study superconductors in their Physics department. Over the next two years, alongside the SERC fellowship, I not only became involved in social activism but also joined the philosophy department at Warwick (across the road from physics) to study for an MA in continental philosophy. My dissertation was titled *Thinking Between Cultures: Receiving the Guru Granth* – it was a study of scriptural hermeneutics in the context of cross-cultural philosophy. I studied with Martin Warner, Keith Ansell Pearson, David Wood, Andrew Benjamin, and Miguel Beistegui. The MA in 1994 led me to a PhD program jointly supervised by Christopher Shackle (SOAS) and Martin Warner (Warwick). The arrangement was somewhat novel at the time, but it allowed me to have supervision in philosophy (from Warwick) and in history of religions and more formal language training (SOAS). The PhD dissertation was titled *Thinking Between Cultures: Metaphysics and Cultural Translations* and led me down multiple pathways (translation studies, decoloniality, philosophy and history of religions, theology) that I continue to explore to this day.

As you can see, this was not “Sikh studies” – in fact, I tried my best not to focus my training either in area studies or in religion. Sikh and Punjabi literature, culture, and history comprised the background material (in the sense of providing the raw data) for my research, but my focus was on ideas and thought processes. This was partly by choice. Having already done a PhD and coming from a philosophy background helped me figure out not only how to work at the intersections of different disciplines but also to decipher their rules and where possible reformulate the boundaries of an academic discipline to suit my own project. Having said that, since 1989 I’d been fortunate enough to be in close contact with scholars of Sikh and Punjab studies. My hometown, Coventry, was an active intellectual center for Sikh and Punjab studies. It was the place where I was inducted into the Punjab Research Group, which not only provided a window into contemporary research on Punjab, but also doubled as a forum for Sikh studies. Alongside the PRG meetings I was also an active member of two very progressive Sikh societies that did some highly innovative work in the West Midlands laying the foundations for later educational developments and an NGO. One was the Sikh Cultural Society of Coventry, which brought together Sikh professionals in the city. The other was the Sikh Educational and Welfare Association (SEWA) founded by Dav Panesar and myself. With the SCS I started a print magazine called *Sikh Reformer*, which was widely distributed in university Sikh societies and sparked off many copycat magazines in different cities. My editing work on the *Sikh Reformer* would come in handy a decade later when I would start a proper academic journal with a very similar name. The NGO that I worked for was the Sikh Human Rights group. Led by Dr. Jasdev Rai, the SHRG did some sterling work through the 1990s. At the time I was involved in monitoring and cataloging human rights abuses in Punjab. In the late 1990s the SHRG was actively involved in drafting aspects of the United Nations Declaration on Diversity, a project that was formulated during the run-up to the UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, 2001. Going back to the PRG, although I learned much from its scholarly meetings, I was also frustrated and felt stifled by its lack of theoretical innovation. But it was through my involvement with SEWA, SHRG, SCS, and the PRG that I became aware that there was an actual field of scholarship, somewhat nascent at the time, called “Sikh studies.”

As I recollect – and this will confirm your own observations, Pashaura – Sikh studies was caught in a double bind. On the one hand it was very much an emerging field spear-headed by the efforts

to fund endowed chairs in North America by some visionary Sikhs and building on the scholarship of people like W.H. McLeod, Jerry Barrier, and others. On the other hand, some scholars associated with the endowed chairs were coming under sustained attack from a certain section of the community. I won't say much more about this since you were a recipient and therefore firsthand witness to the ferocity of these attacks. I was a student at the time but also active in my local community. We watched and read about the so-called "wars of scholarship" with a sense of complete dismay and fascination. Dismay, because the attacks on scholars tarnished the community's already poor global image. Fascination, because the endowment of Sikh chairs in North America provided a model for Sikh communities in the UK to follow. The topic was debated in the Coventry community, and by 1997 a concerted effort was made by a combination of local scholars and community leaders to initiate a program of Sikh and Punjab studies at Coventry University. Unlike the North American model, the Coventry model was meant to have been funded initially for five years with money from "Europe" as part of a broader plan to build the capacity of local and regional Sikh communities. Dav Panesar, who was an absolute whiz in community development, led the effort to procure the money from development pots in Europe. He managed to get close to half a million to start the program, which was formally launched in 1998 as part of the Khalsa tricentennial celebrations. I was hired to head the program and teach courses in Sikh and Punjab studies, while in the process of completing my PhD dissertation. However, the program folded after two years due to political factionalism within the Sikh community. Although it was deeply disappointing to see these efforts come to nothing, the Coventry experiment ignited a desire amongst other sectors of the Sikh community, especially in the West Midlands, to establish a more permanent model of Sikh studies. Thus by 2000 the Nishkam Sevak Jatha had launched a similar effort at the University of Birmingham, as I recall some of their people came to a couple of the SEWA meetings and took away some of our most progressive projects, such as the *Sikh Action Plan*, which was a blueprint for community education from kindergarten to university and beyond. A similar movement by the Wolverhampton community resulted in the creation of a center for Sikh and Punjab studies at the University of Wolverhampton in 2018. As for myself, in 1999 I took up a postdoctoral fellowship in Sikh studies at SOAS for a period of two years, after which I was hired by Hofstra University, New York, and became first holder of the S.K.K. Bindra Chair in Sikh studies.

So to answer the question more directly – Sikh studies was nonexistent in the early 1990s when I started my training, and even by the mid to late 1990s, it was in a very experimental phase in the UK. Which also explains why I trained as widely as possible, treating Sikh studies more as a peripheral or add-on component, rather than central to my intellectual trajectory. What did I hope to achieve? In the early 1990s all I really wanted was some sort of spiritual, intellectual, and existential fulfillment, a way to lay my experiences of cultural racism and "1984" to rest, to find my place, and my community's place in the world. I still wanted to work in both fields (science and humanities – especially in philosophy), but when I had to give up my science career, and as my research became more serious and showed signs of potential success by the late 1990s, and by learning from the North American experience, the prospect of a teaching position that could benefit local communities, wider non-Sikh communities, and the next generation of scholars began to look more and more attractive.

Who or what were your intellectual influences, and can you say a little bit about your training?

PS

At Gurmat College, Patiala, I had the privilege of studying under the guidance of Professor Harbans Singh, Principal Satbir Singh, Dr. Ganda Singh, Dr. Taran Singh, Dr. Sahib Singh, Dr. Avtar Singh,

Piara Singh Padam, Gurbachan Singh Talib, Giani Lal Singh, Dr. Jagbir Singh, Nirbhai Singh, Swaranjit Singh, Labh Singh, and several visiting professors of different religious traditions. These were the stalwarts in their respective fields of Sikh history, literature, theology, and scriptural studies at that time. Both Principal Satbir Singh and Giani Lal Singh were masters of oratory. We listened to their public lectures on Sikh topics with great interest. Dr. Ganda Singh taught us methodology in the examination of historical sources. It was a pleasant surprise for us to watch him regularly walking several miles every evening from his house to a village near Gurmat College. We were exposed to different perspectives on various issues in class discussions. I still remember a fierce debate between Piara Singh Padam and Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi on the authorship of the *Dasam Granth*. Dr. Taran Singh was creative, articulate, and authoritative in scriptural interpretation. Dr. Sahib Singh taught us the grammatical constructions of *gurbānī* (“Utterances of the Gurus”) in his lectures in the class. I also remember the day when he suffered a stroke while doing the exegesis of a scriptural passage in the morning *divān* in the gurdwara. Professor Swaranjit Singh and I held him in our arms and took him to the hospital. He could not fully recover from the stroke, and he died a few years later in 1977. Those were the good old days when I received training in the current Sikh scholarship and comparative study of other religious traditions. Even Professor W.H. McLeod visited our college in 1973, and we raised several questions during his lecture on the *Janam-sakhis*. I had no idea at that time that someday I would be working closely with him at the University of Toronto, an experience which was both a blessing and a curse. It was a pleasure to work with him because he carefully read the early drafts of my writings and provided helpful suggestions at various points along the way. He even encouraged me to disagree with his own viewpoints on certain issues and he made every effort to see that I critically approach all the sources at hand. Since he was the most controversial scholar in Sikh circles because of his skeptical historical approach, I had to bear the brunt of my association with him. Consequently, my own scholarship became controversial among orthodox circles right from the beginning. Nevertheless, I cherish the time I spent with Professor McLeod because I was able to become my own person in the field of Sikh studies.

ASM

As I alluded to earlier, I received relatively little formal training in Sikh and Punjabi studies. Almost all of it was self-acquired over a period of many years. I was fortunate to grow up in a home environment where multiple languages were either read or spoken (my father was educated in Urdu, Persian, and Punjabi, my mother in Hindi and Punjabi) and all of this rubbed off on me. I read virtually everything I could find in Sikh/Punjabi/South Asian literature. As a matter of fact, I had been collecting books and articles on this topic since I was 11 or 12 years old, so I treated it as a hobby that provided a very enjoyable respite from reading scientific papers and treatises. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was drawn more towards history and literature, but I also had a small collection of books on Sikh philosophy and theology, much of it beyond my comprehension at the time, but this was a subject that attracted me more in late 1980s and early 1990s. Sher Singh's *Philosophy of Sikhism* was a definite influence, and by 1990, I was also influenced by works of Avtar Singh, Taran Singh, Nirbhai Singh, Gurbhagat Singh, and especially Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia. It was these works that led me back to the Singh Sabha literature, especially the scriptural commentaries. I learned “*santhya*” and grammar of the Sikh scriptures from the works of Sahib Singh, Randhir Singh, and Chris Shackle (although the experience turned me into an anti-grammarian). From 1989 to around 1994 I studied the art of *katha* and absorbed a great deal from traveling oral exegetes such as Giani Sant Singh Maskin and Prof. Darshan Singh, both in person and from their audio recordings and books.

Aside from all this I received formal training in continental and comparative philosophy, cultural theory and the study of religion, and was influenced by the intellectual currents of the time,

including deconstruction, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, world philosophies, translation theory, and psychoanalysis. It was these movements that helped me better understand the nature of the knowledge system, the limits of disciplinary frameworks, and how Sikh studies could benefit from them. If I had to cite specific philosophical influences, I would start with Spinoza, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan. When I first came into contact with Sikh and Punjab studies specialists, a lot of them thought this theoretical training was just superfluous baggage. I looked at things from the opposite perspective and wondered how anybody could survive (let alone flourish) in the humanities and social sciences without an ability to push back against the disciplinary framing? If Sikh studies was going to have wider relevance to the humanities and social sciences it needed to enable its concepts to travel across, between disciplines, and beyond disciplines. Without this ability, Sikh studies people would remain at the mercy of Orientalists and Asian studies specialists.

Can you tell us about the emergence and development of the field of Sikh studies? What were the major obstacles to its development? What have been the most positive developments?

PS

Let me begin with the introduction of Sikh studies in North America. Historically, the first North American conference on the Sikh tradition was held in 1976 at the University of California, Berkeley. It was co-sponsored by the Sikh Foundation of Palo Alto headed by the late Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, who expressed the view that Sikhs formed a “fascinating source” for sociological study. He argued that Sikhs had demonstrated “an uncanny capability to retain their identity, beliefs, and traditions” while participating “most actively” in North American life. At that conference it was generally acknowledged that the Sikh tradition was indeed “the forgotten tradition” in scholarly circles in North America.

Mark Juergensmeyer in particular argued that in world religions textbooks the study of Sikhism was either completely ignored or misrepresented as an example of the syncretistic derivative of Hinduism and Islam. He examined the various reasons for this treatment and suggested that there are two main prejudices in Indian Studies that function against the study of the Sikh tradition. The first prejudice was to ignore modern trends in scholarship. Many scholars continued to follow a broadly Orientalist perspective in as much as their research remained focused on the classical texts of Indian philosophy rather than newer movements or devotional traditions. Since the Sikh tradition is barely 500 years old and relatively modern, it has been completely ignored in Indian studies. The other prejudice that faces Sikh studies in Indian literature is the prejudice against regionalism. Sikhism is not only relatively modern, but it is also almost exclusively Punjabi. In his arguments, Juergensmeyer made the case for the utility of Sikhism for the studies of religion, particularly textual studies, mythology, social studies, and political thought. Since then, the study of the Sikh tradition and culture has received some cautious scholarly attention. The mistaken notion that Sikhism offers a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim ideals has been completely abandoned in most recent scholarly works.

The idea of establishing a Sikh studies chair in any North American university was first conceived by the Sikh Society of Calgary in 1979 at the suggestion of the late Professor W.H. McLeod who was invited to inaugurate the newly built gurdwara at Guru Nanak Centre in Calgary on Baisakhi Day. The aim of the Sikh Society in inviting a Western scholar of Sikh studies from New Zealand was to build a positive image of the Sikhs in the host society. Professor McLeod inspired the Sikh community to work for the establishment of a chair of Sikh studies at a Canadian university. He assured them that this kind of program would give academic respectability to the Sikh tradition

within the academy and remove the prevailing ignorance about the Sikhs in a larger social context. The work in this direction had started in 1980, and I myself participated in the fundraising efforts with much enthusiasm. The Sikh Society handed this project over to the newly formed Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada (FSSC) at the All-Canada Sikh Convention held at Calgary in 1981. The FSSC made an appeal to the Sikh community in connection with their fund-raising efforts for the establishment of the chair in Sikh studies on November 20, 1983, much before the events of 1984. As a matter of fact, they had passed the resolution in this regard at the "All Canada Sikh Convention 1983" held at Ottawa on July 31, 1983. They had already entered negotiations with the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the University of British Columbia (UBC) for the establishment of the "Program of Punjabi and Sikh Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver." However, the formal agreement was signed on March 16, 1985, and the first occupant of the chair, Harjot Oberoi, was appointed in 1987.

It is important to note the significance of internal dynamics as well as external factors for comprehending the processes of change visible within the Sikh community because of the tragic events of 1984, incidents that include both Operation Blue Star in June, when the Indian army assaulted the Golden Temple Complex and the genocide of Sikhs nationwide in November after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Unsurprisingly, the year 1984 became the turning point in the history of the Sikhs in the postcolonial and postmodern world. Some scholars have overemphasized the impact of 1984 events on the different arenas of Sikh studies. They maintain that 1984 was a catalyst or an overriding factor in Sikh studies both in India and abroad. For instance, Karl L. Hutterer, director of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, presented a position paper in 1986 on "Why Sikh Studies?," underlining the fact that events since the army attack on the Golden Temple Complex in 1984 have shown that "Americans almost without exception are utterly uneducated about the nature of Sikh religion and culture." He made the case that the University of Michigan should be "among the pioneers to include Sikh Studies in its curriculum." As a result, the Sikh Studies Association of Michigan signed a formal agreement with the University of Michigan on July 23, 1986, to establish a Sikh Endowment Fund to "support a position in Sikh Studies in the College of Literature, Science and the Arts of the University, including any chair in Sikh Studies into which it may subsequently be converted."

While appreciating the impact of 1984 on Sikh studies, one needs to be aware of other issues contributing to its recent growth in the West. The growth of Sikh studies in the last 20 years needs to be seen also in the context of emerging fields such as Cultural Studies/Area Studies pursued in different Western universities. A helpful way to look at this is to consider the 1984 scenario to what happened in the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is well-known that 9/11 stimulated the large expansion of studies that deal with Islam or Muslim societies residing in different parts of the world. Thus, one cannot rule out the significance of such incidents in history, and the impact of Oak Creek Gurdwara massacre may well provide new impetus for the development of Sikh studies in North America. Since the early Sikh studies programs did originate in the context of the post-1984 events in the Punjab, the initial community response towards these projects was overwhelming. Through these programs, Sikhs of North America had expected to provide their youth with university-level instruction in their religious and cultural tradition, and to make that tradition accessible to the wider non-Sikh community. Meanwhile, a small group of Sikh scholars, nurtured in a narrow mode of doctrinal interpretation, became busy in the process of scrutinizing all research in Sikh studies, in effect appointing themselves as the authority on knowledge about Sikhism. Any kind of scholarly ideas and interpretations that did not appear to pass their litmus test of the "authentic representation of tradition" became targets of their polemical attacks. This organized group was able to exercise considerable control over the Sikh press and mobilize public opinion against scholars who were

holding Sikh studies positions. Consequently, Harjot Oberoi resigned as chair of Punjabi and Sikh studies at UBC in 1997 and shifted his focus to Asian Studies instead. The community support to the fledgling programs of Sikh studies at the University of Toronto and Columbia University in New York came to an end, resulting in the termination of these programs.

The last decade of the twentieth century may be regarded as the phase of “growing pains” in the field of Sikh studies. It is, however, instructive to note that the kind of socioreligious controversy surrounding the works of the scholars of the Sikh tradition is not something new. It is surprisingly a frequent phenomenon and happens most of the time in homogenous traditional societies. Thus, it is structural/political and is like the experiences of scholars working in comparable contexts such as the battles fought in the nineteenth century in Jewish and Christian Studies, when the historicity of both the Jewish scriptures and the Christian Gospels were questioned. The issues pertaining to South Asian modernization and diaspora provide the key to understanding the true nature of such controversies. There are many conservative followers of Western traditions, too, who do not like much of the academic discourse about their traditions. They have, nevertheless, adapted to the existence of that discourse. Although they may ignore academic discourse as trivial in its disregard of real religious truth, they frequently glean insights from it despite perceived distortions. In the classroom, we frequently observe that analytic understandings help many contemporary students come to terms with their own traditions and appreciate them even more in their intellectual development. In the West, Sikh studies is a new field, and much of the reaction to scholars’ work reflects the Sikh community’s relative lack of experience with the analytic understanding of their tradition. As that experience grows in this regard, Sikhs are likely to make adaptations and discoveries like those of their counterparts from other religious traditions – often ignoring analytic works as not serious, sometimes appreciating them in part.

ASM

I think you’ve provided some important and closely observed insights into the development of Sikh studies in North America, and your observations are obviously informed by a training and professional experience that has straddled three different institutional settings (India, Canada, and the USA). On that note let me say a little bit about the development of Sikh studies in the UK. One institution that is historically linked with Sikh studies (even before the field came into being in the 1970s) is SOAS (“School of Oriental and African Studies”) at the University of London. For some context, it is where Sher Singh wrote his PhD thesis way back in the 1930s (which became the influential *Philosophy of Sikhism*), where both W.H. McLeod and J.S. Grewal did their PhDs and where the linguist Christopher Shackle was based for many years and compiled and published the *Guru Nanak Glossary* and *Sacred Language of the Sikhs*. It is surprising, therefore, Sikhs in the UK have not succeeded in establishing an endowed position at SOAS given that the wealthiest Sikhs in the UK reside in or around London. Instead the next big effort in developing Sikh studies was at Coventry University (which folded after two years), at Wolverhampton University and at the University of Birmingham in 2003. Of these the only endowed position to date is at Birmingham, but it is already proving problematic because the Indian government seems to have some involvement in the position. In short, the UK has great potential for creating permanent Sikh studies positions in universities, and the added benefit of having large communities and potential student numbers in the vicinity of the universities, but the idea of permanent endowments hasn’t fully taken hold in the community’s imagination. Perhaps what needs to be explored more carefully is why there is such reticence? Some have argued that endowments in the USA have been led by individual donors and that the Sikh migrants to the USA have tended to be more educated and therefore inclined to support major educational projects. That might have been the case back in the 1970s and 1980s, but

I'm not so sure about it now. The UK has a large pool of highly educated and well-placed second-, third-, and fourth-generation Sikhs. Other factors are clearly involved. I've also heard it said that UK universities present a higher financial bar to the creation of endowments – in the region of 4M? Again, I'm not inclined to agree here either. Although US universities present the same price tag, on paper at least, and primarily in the big flagship universities. But in practice, both donors and communities have managed to negotiate far lower price tags. I don't see this can't be replicated in the UK.

As far as positive developments are concerned, it may be possible to think about this in a different way, where such developments have been made possible by endowed Sikh chairs. For example, one of the important developments for the broader field of Sikh studies has been the successful establishment of an academic journal *Sikh Formations*, which is now a brand name in the field. What the journal has managed to do was to radically expand the orbit and reach of Sikh studies as an academic field. Prior to 2004 most Sikh studies meetings were attended by specialists in the field – those who had the requisite language, area, and historical training. We did this not only by making the journal far more interdisciplinary but by instituting a critical assumption about what constitutes “Sikh” and what constitutes “studies.” The whole idea was to break the rigid binarism between objective studies of, or about, Sikhs/Sikhism/Punjab, by redefining “Sikh” as an epistemologically and ontologically open category, a confluence of different encounters and interactions between thought, ideas, and activities. Instead of being conceived as a rigid social or religious identity, “Sikh” basically became a mobile perspective from which to see and interact with the rest of the world. Likewise “studies” assumes a mode of critical thinking that resists being bound into the framework of objectivism that has been so dominant in the humanities and social sciences. The result of this is that we've managed to expand the group of people who read and study Sikhs/Sikhism/Punjab. Sikh studies is no longer the hold of “specialists” who tend to ply their trade in the service of governments, states, think tanks, and other organizations who may want to exert control of Sikhism and Sikhs. Have we achieved exactly what we wanted? Absolutely not! We're just at the beginning stages. Our next project is to provide room for even more experimental ways of thinking about Sikh studies going beyond the journal format and also responding to a rapidly changing educational environment.

What is Sikh studies for? Whom does it serve? Should it be a separate field in its own right? What is the relationship between “Sikh studies” and the “Sikh World”?

PS

The field of Sikh studies is meant for giving due recognition to the Sikh tradition in academic circles, by promoting the study of Sikh religion, philosophy, history, literature, culture, Punjabi language, and related subjects. It serves both Sikh and non-Sikh students alike in the academy. Given the ethical importance and universal relevance of the teachings of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh tradition, it is the desire of every devoted Sikh that this message be made accessible to as large an audience as possible. Making Sikh studies part of the university curriculum simultaneously associates the Sikh tradition with a certain academic profile and prestige ensuring accessibility of its message to a wide range of young people many of whom will be future social and political leaders. This is the advantage of making Sikh studies as a separate field in its own right. Diaspora Sikhs have long cherished the idea of passing on their cultural heritage and language to coming generations born in North America, UK, Mainland Europe, Australia, New Zealand, East Africa, and Southeast Asian countries. Despite the evident economic success of the Sikhs in the diaspora, they have largely experienced social isolation, an experience that springs from a pervasive ignorance about Sikhs and the Sikh tradition. Thus, Sikh studies programs at various universities can help to erode massive

ignorance that now exists in mainstream societies. The relationship between “Sikh Studies” and the “Sikh World” is intimate because both address the immediate concerns of the living experience of the Sikh community (Panth). Modern Sikh studies is a newly emerging field in the Western academy. It is an intellectual formation where the social, political, educational, intellectual, and spiritual aspirations of progressive diasporic Sikhs have strongly intersected.

Much of the foundational scholarship in the field of Sikh studies has followed historical and textual approaches, sometimes to the extent of softening the focus on Sikh practices, performances, and every day “doings” of Sikh lives. The growing turn in religious studies towards “lived religion” calls scholars to be aware that “religions” are at least as much about things that people “do” as about the ideas, ideals, and central narratives enshrined within their texts and scripture. Rather than dichotomize text and practice, the essays in this volume have drawn attention to the intersection between Sikh sacred texts and actual practices of the Sikh community. It should be emphasized that there is a continuing conflict over the nature of traditions and between opposing views of history and practice among Sikhs for over a century, covering a wide range of significant academic issues, such as religious orthodoxy/orthopraxy versus fundamentalism, nationalism, economic and political mobility, gender awareness, and cultural transmission and adaptation. In addition to addressing all these issues specifically, most of the essays in this volume do focus on the transmission of Sikh culture and heritage as well as current dilemmas confronting the Sikh community at the global level. Most interestingly, historical interpretations, ritual performances, the nature of authority, and creative responses to changing circumstances are the burning questions that do not lend themselves to easy solutions. However, we do hope that an open exchange of ideas and alternative interpretations reduce tension and ultimately lead to a resolution of differences acceptable to Sikhs as a whole. In this context, *The Sikh World* makes a positive contribution towards that process, and for this reason this volume may be regarded as the path-clearing work in the field of Sikh studies.

ASM

I am much in agreement with your basic stance on the nature and purpose of Sikh studies. The question asking “What is . . . ?” is an important one and its significance is often misunderstood, given especially that Sikh studies is not immune to the legacies of colonialism. Gaining recognition for Sikh studies in the Western academy and the university curriculum has not been an easy task (and is still beset with difficulties). That curriculum (in the humanities and social sciences) was designed at the height of the European empire in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The Sikh world in the nineteenth century had ceded its political sovereignty after the fall of the Sikh kingdom – most people know this. But far less understood is that as the encounters between the India and Europe became intensified in the late nineteenth century, the Sikh world also ceded its “epistemic sovereignty” to the West, as knowledge about its cultures, traditions, spiritual, and thought processes were subjected to the dominance of English as a linguistic, cultural, and religious medium and relocated within the framework of global thought. From this epistemic event (which was every bit as violent and insidious as the Anglo-Sikh wars, and not least because it involved the inadvertent collusion of Sikh colonial elites), the West drew immense privileges as it defined the parameters for the management of knowledge about the Sikh world, and how Sikhs and Sikhism could and would be defined in the university system. This is the epistemic environment that Sikh studies inherited in the 1970s and 1980s, and many of us could see this in the operating assumptions and categorization of academic gatekeepers and specialists in the early days. In short, there has been and continues to be an internal battle within Sikh studies to take back the very ground of Sikh studies within the humanities and social sciences. Most community people simply don’t see this active intellectual resistance going on, and those aligned with fringe groups have done much to hinder this

resistance. So what is Sikh studies for? Quite simply, as a field it needs to recognize and reposition the basic categories, concepts of Sikh thought and its lifeworld in a more positive relationship to the university system, its curriculum, etc. Pivotal to this activity is the recognition of Sikh *thought and concepts* (whether we call this Sikh philosophy, theology, or whatever) as a legitimate part of the research agenda of Sikh studies. The “Sikh World” should not be an object for the West, or for that matter any other state (such as India), to position as it pleases. Rather this reassertion of Sikh epistemic sovereignty is essential to Sikh studies and at the same time an expression of the diasporic nature of Sikh subjectivity. Most importantly Sikh studies has the potential to help individuals and communities in the Sikh world to create new, more creative and productive relations to the rest of the world. So should it be a separate field? Of course! There is no question about that in my mind, but it should at the same time also be more connected to the curriculum – and if possible be able to affect the mainstream system, which I see as an expression of its diasporicity.

Are Punjab studies and Sikh studies the same thing?

PS

My immediate answer is “No.” Punjab studies deal with broader issues of Punjabi language, culture, and literature produced in East Punjab in India and West Punjab in Pakistan, along with the Punjabis from both countries settled in the diaspora. It is, therefore, linked with *Punjabi-ness* (“Punjabi-ness”) and Punjabi identity, which include Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim adherents around the world. Sikh studies, on the other hand, deal with the ideals of *Sikhi* (“Sikh-ness”) and the practices of Sikhs as part of Sikh religion and culture. Although *Sikhi* has a symbiotic relationship with a wholesome *Punjabi-ness* and Punjabi language, Sikh studies is mainly focused on the study of Sikh religion, culture, and identity in the exclusive sense. There is no doubt that Sikh culture has been increasingly challenged in recent times to face up to its failures in uprooting caste pride and gender bias, both reflective of Punjabi culture. Nevertheless, the inclusive norms of *Sikhi* offer egalitarian and ecological principles that have universal appeal at the global level. The discipline of Sikh studies, therefore, has a wider appeal to the scholars around the world than Punjab studies.

ASM

My answer is also “No” – and I agree with the reasons you state above, but maybe for different reasons. “Punjabi-ness” as an artificial intellectual formation spearheaded by militantly secular Punjabi nationalists in the early decades of the twentieth century, and primarily as a reaction to Sikh reformism. Punjab Studies as we see it in the post-1980s period has been fostered by the same mindset. It couldn’t succeed intellectually because its conceptual machinery is trapped in an ethno-culturalist and area-studies framework, which positions any hint of Sikh consciousness as tantamount to an expression of “nationalism” – which is both absurd and incorrect. Moreover, to add to the absurdity, most of its practitioners are themselves from a Sikh background. Punjab studies scholars often argue that Sikh studies is intellectually isolationist and anti-pluralist, whereas Punjab studies captures the plurality of Punjab’s cultural ethos (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh etc.). Again this is both a superficial assessment and quite misleading because the kind of pluralism they argue for is already drawn from Western secularism. I would call it quantitative pluralism, which is totally different from the qualitative pluralism that the various traditions of Punjab have fostered for nearly two millennia. What I mean by qualitative pluralism is something *internal to the consciousness* of Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, who have grown up within the Punjabi culture and ethos. In other words, one can *be* Sikh and still have a strong internal sense of multiplicity that already includes Others within the Self. The proponents of “Punjabi-ness” tend to confuse this internal multiplicity

with secular modern (Western) pluralism. I saw these intellectual tensions play out in the Punjab Research Group, which had the same attitude towards Sikh consciousness – wanting to define it, control it, and ultimately marginalize its voice.

Is the intellectual approach to Sikh studies in the Western academies different from the Indian academy?

PS

Yes. The study and teaching of the Sikh tradition at the universities in Punjab are guided by the academic standards approved by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in India. In addition to Sikh studies curriculum, we had to take courses in Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jain, and Islamic traditions from a comparative perspective at Gurmat College, Patiala. In this regard our college was certainly different from a theological seminary in any Western country. The model of Religious Studies at Punjabi University followed the pattern of Harvard University at the suggestion of Professor Harbans Singh, who had visited there on a fellowship. During his stay at Harvard, he had made acquaintance with Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith who influenced him to a great extent about the study of religion. However, professors who were teaching us were nurtured in the Singh Sabha mode of doctrinal interpretation. Unsurprisingly, Sikh studies in the Punjab universities at that early stage reflected a kind of scholarship that was duly in conformity with Sikh orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Academic techniques are certainly different from those of theologians, traditional scholars, and preachers. In our Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside, we employ the metaphors of “pulpit” and “podium” while giving instructions to the students that there are two chief ways through which religions are studied. The “pulpit” represents the *confessional* approach followed by religious preachers and theologians who instruct and nurture the understanding of their communities.

By contrast, the “podium” represents the *academic* approach to understanding religions, an approach that is visible in the work of scholars and professors in colleges and universities who seek to inform students about the religions of the world. The academic study of religions uses the tools and resources of the human sciences. Thus, students and scholars of religions employ a variety of approaches characteristic of the humanities, social sciences, and arts as they ask and seek to answer a wide range of questions. They tap historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, textual, philosophical, theological, ethical, and comparative methods, seeking to satisfy their curiosity, inform their minds, expand their thinking, and develop their abilities to examine religions, and the many debates about them both appreciatively and critically. Religions are studied as cross-cultural features of human life. And although faith in divinity, supernatural beings, spirits, forces, powers, and laws of the universe are commonly discovered features of religions, religious faith is neither assumed nor promoted in the academic study of the religions. Faith is not taken for granted but is part of the database of what is studied. In the university, we seek to understand what religious people believe, think, do, value, and hope for – and what critics of religion have to say as well. We work to understand the ways in which religions operate in the world, for good and for ill. Students are encouraged to engage in the processes of inquiry and investigation with open-minded attention to sources (texts, practices, participants). In the process of doing so, they are expected to grow in the skills of paying disciplined attention to the facts, noticing and analyzing claims, engaging in appreciative, critical, and comparative analysis and interpretation, and developing skills in oral and written communication through which they express their developing insights, understandings, and new questions. These differing approaches to the understanding of religions are not oppositional. But neither ought to be confused with each other, for each has its own distinctive mission and purpose.

ASM

Yes, the Western and Indian approaches have been different, and largely for the reasons you state above. However, we may need to bear something else in mind. The nature and model of the university is changing at a very rapid pace, not least due to the advances in technology as we've seen during the pandemic. In the Western university the humanities and social sciences curriculum is slowly but surely being decolonized. This decolonization is also affecting the humanities and social sciences in India. More and more academics trained in the West are now finding jobs in Indian universities, which have been expanding and updating their humanities curricula. It may take a while, but I can already see the possibilities of greater interaction between scholars and students in Western and Indian universities. For example, I have discussed the idea of opening one or more of my graduate-level courses to academics and graduate students in Punjab and Delhi. The idea is not that they formally enroll on the course (although that's not inconceivable sometime in the future) but that we could learn from each other's perspectives, pedagogical styles, improve language transmission and understanding in Punjabi/English on both sides. I can see great possibilities for such collaboration. Maybe I'm an idealist, but I can also see the possibility of institutions becoming more intertwined across continents. It will benefit everyone, but only if we can move past the deeply unethical neo-liberal model of education which is designed only to reap increasing profits for the already rich.

How does Sikh studies fit into the knowledge system of the contemporary university?

PS

I can speak about my own field of textual studies and how it fits into the production of knowledge in the academy. Textual analysis is an acknowledged discipline in the academic study of the sacred texts of world religions. The text of the *Adi Granth* is thus an important focus for scholarly inquiry. By employing this method one can reconstruct its history by addressing the fundamental question of how the text of the *Adi Granth* came into being. By doing so one can understand the redaction process that was at work behind the whole operation of formulating an authoritative text. One can also determine the scribal errors committed in the process of copying as well as the intentional tampering with the text by some later scribes. However, one should keep in mind that textual analysis is not a branch of mathematics, nor indeed an exact science at all. It deals with a matter that is neither rigid nor constant, like lines and numbers, but rather fluid and variable. It is, therefore, not surprising that at times different scholars may provide different interpretations while using the same data. Sikhs are fortunate in having in their possession the original Kartarpur Pothe prepared in *sambat* 1661 (1604 CE) under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan, a touchstone for later scribes in authenticating their copies of the text. Based on my examination of early manuscripts, I can say this with confidence that no other contemporary or near-contemporary religious compilation can be compared with the doctrinal consistency and complexity of the *Adi Granth* structure. It is a masterpiece of organization. Guru Gobind Singh closed the canon by including the works of his father. A rare manuscript of this final canon in the form of the Damdama Bir ("version") prepared in *sambat* 1764 (1707 CE) under the supervision of the tenth Guru is preserved at Toshakhana of Takht Sachkhand Sri Hazur Sahib Abchalnagar in Nander, Maharashtra. This is the version of the modern standard volume of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The most recent controversy about making "corrections" to the text of the *Guru Granth Sahib* by Thaminder Singh Anand and Onkar Singh has arisen from the complete ignorance of the ancient grammatical conventions of the sacred language of *gurbānī* and the editorial perspective of Guru Arjan behind the compilation of the Sikh scripture. Due to the worldwide reaction within the Sikh community and the intervention of the Akal Takht, this case is still under investigation.

In my graduate seminars, for instance, our focus is on the basic issue of how the pattern of assimilation, redaction, and canonization in the Sikh scriptural tradition compares with analogous scriptural histories of both Hindu and Islamic traditions in South Asia. Understanding how the Sikh scripture emerged tells us about the process of canonization in general, and the dynamics of this process in the Sikh tradition in particular. We address the issues of scriptural adaptation, with specific reference to the inclusion of the hymns of fifteen non-Sikh saints in the *Adi Granth*. Theoretical works of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, William A. Graham, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida are paired, when appropriate, with primary and secondary readings. They are helpful in understanding the issues raised in the Wimbush volume on “Theorizing Scriptures.” We seek to problematize scripture as a complex cross-cultural phenomenon involving our discourses, rituals, practices, representations, myths, ideologies and power relations. We examine the cultural contexts for the composition and reading of scriptural texts, oral/written dimensions of scriptures, top-down and bottom-up modes of canonization, liturgical use of scriptural texts in various traditions, practices of reading and interpretation, the physical medium and languages of scriptural texts, the translation controversies, notion of revelation, and ontological conceptions of scripture, textual imagery, structural aspects of the text, issues of comparative scripture, and so on. All these academic issues fit into the structure of the knowledge system of the contemporary university system.

ASM

This question has been central to my research and teaching ever since I was a graduate student who struggled not only with getting the sovereignty of Sikh concepts and thought processes recognized within the disciplines of philosophy and religion, but with applying these concepts in the real world. To give a concrete example, in my classes I often teach my students how to think about “violence,” “philosophy,” or the “experience of diasporicity” from a Sikh perspective – which means having to convince the students not only that Sikh concepts actually exist and are shareable and applicable to the rest of humanity, but just as importantly how to position them favorably in the knowledge system so that they are not marginalized under the category of “religion,” or dismissed as “esoteric,” “exotic,” etc. My approach is to go beyond mere representations of “violence,” “philosophy,” “diaspora,” and to try and tease out how Sikh experience, consciousness, or subjectivity informs a different sense or understanding of these concepts. To do this, however, it’s necessary to shift the plane on which knowledge is conducted and constructed, from the plane of objective rationality to a plane that enables the difference of Sikh concepts to coexist with other concepts in the world. This is partly a pedagogical move where the internal multiplicity of my diasporic Sikh consciousness (my diasporic Sikh self) becomes the new plane where the objective-outside and the subjective-inside coexist and cohabit. This sounds like a complicated move, but it is actually intuitive and quite simple. Instead of standing in opposition to the self of the dominant culture (which is responsible for making the knowledge system), the trick is to learn how to say no to the oppositional framework of modernity and the modern knowledge-system but without debunking it. The way to do this is to show the dominant knowledge-system (and all its devoted retinue of clerics) that its central and overriding concern is to maintain its exclusive sense of identity and sameness and that it is intrinsically incapable of genuine pluralism. Having demonstrated that we offer it a plane of consciousness that is genuinely pluralistic and deeply inclusive of the Western and the Sikh. In this way, the “differential consciousness” intrinsic to myself or subjectivity (which is basically a plane where differences are always encountering each other) is folded into a powerful pedagogical technique I deploy alongside the orthodox frameworks of objective knowledge production. However, such an approach necessarily involves coming up against the limits of the knowledge-system itself. It makes the knowledge system and its often-unspoken rules and biases visible to the students, which can be

disconcerting – and of course I’m facilitating the whole process. It’s not something you’re taught in the academy (in fact quite the opposite) but something you *live*, and you’re making that life-process and everything it touches (culture, language, thought, etc.) available for students to investigate in ways that conventional critical stances based on the model of the hard sciences simply can’t do. And it inevitably involves breaking out of, or breaking through, the subject-object (or insider-outsider) dualism that is treated as almost sacrosanct by the knowledge system.

This of course begs the question: what’s wrong with the usual representational knowledge, the kind that tells us to adopt a distanced (i.e., critical) perspective in the interests of neutrality and production of sound, verifiable knowledge in the form of facts, data, or states of affairs? My answer to this is twofold. First, the knowledge system has predefined and applied the meaning of “the critical” towards the object of study; in fact, this predetermined meaning of “the critical” is what produces objectivity, yet we’re told that we should not be critical of the knowledge system itself. This is why I distrust the recent moves towards so-called “lived religion” – because it is still phenomenology. Second, as I mentioned briefly above, the disciplinary structure of the globalized knowledge system we know today as the humanities and social sciences emerged at the highpoint of European colonization, as Western scholars, administrators, and military personnel were synthesizing and categorizing knowledge about non-Western cultures. The knowledge system assumed and implemented a fundamental division (historical/racial/religious) between the West as the subject and producer of knowledge and the non-West as the object of knowledge. And undergirding this division was a philosophical distinction between an *active* West as having philosophy, having proper thought which intervenes in the contemporary world, and non-Western cultures as *passive* because they have no proper thought or philosophy and therefore cannot intervene in the contemporary world, which in turn means they can only be objects of the Western gaze. This is Orientalism plain and simple – maybe not in the way Said described it, but Orientalism, nevertheless. It was alive and well in the kind of Sikh studies we inherited in the 1990s, manifesting mainly in the demand for scholars and students to produce strictly objective knowledge about Sikhs and Sikhism.

To apply this to the examples of “violence” and “Sikh philosophy” noted above, over a period of two centuries decades, scholars produced a vast amount of data and analysis about Sikhs and violence, but never once in this time was the concept of violence that their research relied on ever questioned. As a result, the normative knowledge system produced a thesis about “violent Sikhs” and “violent Sikhism” that was replicated ad nauseam, with detrimental effects for how Sikhs were received in media and by states and by policy makers. Likewise, “Sikh philosophy” was never considered to be a legitimate field of study in Sikh studies, because the knowledge system had already predetermined that “Sikh philosophy” was no more than a mere ideology or at best a theology. Again, the effects of this have been detrimental in as much as Sikh concepts are devalued as “devotional” and considered unsuitable for adoption in the global arena of thought. In this way, generations of Sikh heritage students and non-Sikhs looking for some kind of thought process in Sikh system were deprived of a fundamental resource.

To what extent does the development of Sikh studies remain tethered to the creation of endowed chairs? Is this the only viable model?

PS

Certainly, endowed chairs have played a significant role in the development of Sikh studies. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, there has been a steady growth of scholarly literature on Sikhism. The increasing scholarly attention that Sikhs and Sikhism are beginning to receive is a new phenomenon in the academy. Indeed, Sikh studies is no longer “the forgotten tradition” of the late

seventies of twentieth century and is becoming increasingly recognized in undergraduate programs, as well as being the benefactor of a growing number of endowed chairs in universities across North America. As a matter of fact, there are now nine endowed chairs in Sikh studies duly established in North America and the UK with the active financial support of the Sikh community. In addition, there are a growing number of scholars in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe whose teaching and research interests are related in some way to Sikh studies. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Sikh studies emerged as a distinct area of scholarship in some of the North American universities. The new chairs of Sikh studies have been part of different university departments, such as Religious Studies and Philosophy (University of California at Riverside and Hofstra University at Long Island, New York), Asian Languages and Cultures (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and University of British Columbia, Vancouver), Global Studies (University of California, Santa Barbara), Comparative Literature (University of California, Santa Cruz), Anthropology (University of California, Irvine), Music (Hofstra University), and the Centre for Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of Wolverhampton (UK). In addition, fresh initiatives are underway to establish programs in Sikh studies and Punjabi language at the University of Calgary in Canada and the University of California, Berkeley. Most of these programs have been funded by wealthy Sikhs and the Sikh community in the diaspora. However, the current efforts to establish the Sikh studies chair at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom is supported by the government of India to celebrate the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak.

Notably, the chair-holders initially focused on issues of Sikh religion, ideology, and history. However, over the years, they have also begun to explore more contentious and contemporary issues of Sikh identity, culture, and social relations. This expansion of the sub-discipline beyond the study of text and ideology also points towards a growing confidence of the scholars, the institutionalization of Sikh studies, and acceptance of Sikhs as an important religious community at the global level. Scholars have now begun to question the conventional premises of Sikh studies, and they seek to go beyond what has been traditionally treated as normatively acceptable. They interpret not only Sikh expressions of ritual, music, visual art, poetry in a wider South Asian and/or diasporic context but also transcend/challenge boundaries between ethnic or religious communities. Moving away from hegemonic interpretations and received historiography, they have begun to draw from a range of methodological perspectives, including philosophy, hermeneutics, migration and diaspora studies, ethnography, performance studies, lived religion approaches, and aesthetics. Reflecting a balance of theory and substantive empirical content, they call into question key critical terms, challenge established frames of reference, and offer alternative and novel “readings” of Sikh ways of knowing and being. In the end, I must say that the establishment of Sikh studies chairs is not the only viable model for the teaching of Sikhism in academic institutions. There is an urgent need to produce a new generation of scholars in various disciplines whose focus should be some aspect of the Sikh tradition. This way they can reach out to a wider audience of students and scholars in those disciplines.

ASM

For me, this question (to endow, or not to endow more chairs, or expand existing programs) touches on several other issues: the increasing precarity of Sikhs and Sikhism in a rapidly changing world, the effects of a shifting geopolitical order on the nature of education (post-pandemic), the viability of the old model of the university and along with it the changing nature of the humanities, and by no means least Sikhs’ relationship to Indian state, which is once again becoming volatile. These are huge issues, so my remarks will be very brief and act more as indicators for broader conversations. Nevertheless, all of these questions circle back to the importance of the knowledge system and the relationship of Sikh studies to it.

To start with Sikh precarity, in the aftermath of the Farmers' protests, which lasted from 2020 to 2022, the Sikh political system and Sikh existence in general has become increasingly precarious, with Sikhs feeling existentially threatened in ways that reminded many of us of what happened after 1984. With the Hindu nationalists exerting increasing leverage on Sikh shrines to produce a more pliable Sikh public, there are increasing signs of the possibility of a return to cycles of violence that led to the events of 1984. In the absence of a viable and independent Sikh academic presence outside Punjab, the Indian state at the time was highly successful in framing Sikhs and Sikhism as fundamentally violent and a threat to Indian democracy. Today, thanks partly to the existence of endowed chairs in Sikh studies, the academic framework is more engaged and able to push back on "fake news" and propaganda. There is an added sense of urgency to this given the Indian state's growing efforts (however indirectly) to influence the narrative of Sikhism, and all the more reason why Sikh communities need to be more positively engaged with, rather boycotting or walking away from, endowed chairs.

As for the second point, despite the negative impact of the pandemic, the implementation of remote technology has shown ways for Sikh studies as a field to reach out to new audiences much further afield than the local ones. It also showed a way for Sikh chairs to collaborate with international colleagues and communities in a way that was not possible before. The obvious benefit is the looming possibility of the various Sikh chairs pooling their respective specializations and collaborating to produce lecture content that can be used by different communities around the world. If Sikh chairs don't do this, there is every possibility that private institutions may be able to take on this role.

In recent years there has been some discussion about the possibility of creating centers of Sikh studies as opposed to individual chairs that are stuck in a particular department. The Center idea is certainly more expensive, but there is no shortage of community funds. Its advantages are obvious. A center would be able to have several faculty teaching different specialisms at one time, and be able to reach many more students (heritage and non-heritage alike). And these faculty need not be "permanent." They can be appointed on short-term contracts (one to three years, for example). This model needs more discussion, but it would add to the existing chairs in a positive way. Yet another model, which I believe is being actively discussed in Canada, is to have stand-alone foundations created by donors or communities outside of the university system, but in a symbiotic relationship where the foundation can play the role of a center but located outside the university. Note, however, that the university and the knowledge system is still critical to the whole process, but there is more scope for a productive relationship between university and communities.

This brings me to yet another possibility. Thus far, Sikh chairs have been created within very secular public and ostensibly secular private universities. The emphasis here is on the secular nature of endowed chairs as they have been embedded within the humanities and social sciences framework. This has not always been entirely positive as the demands of secularity can sanitize the Sikh ethos and Sikh thought, depriving it of the potential for making freer connections with the outside world. What about theological seminaries? These play an important function in the lives of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic knowledge systems and the communities who interact with it. Why not think about endowing a chair in a major theological institute such as Union Theological (NY) or Berkeley. Or in Jesuit institutions such as Marquette University or Loyola Marymount, which have a long record of academic excellence combined with intensive community engagement and openness to different theologies? Why can't secular Sikh chairs (which by the way doesn't make sense!) coexist with Sikh chairs in theological institutes?

What are the important challenges facing Sikh studies in the near and long-term? What new directions might be possible?

PS

Although the field of Sikh studies survived the intolerant reactions to academic scholarship as we have discussed earlier, there are always some challenges that must be addressed from time to time. In my view there are five major challenges facing the field of Sikh studies. In the first place, scholarly controversies provide us with a challenge and an opportunity for self-judgment and growth. Under those circumstances, we should avoid a situation becoming a contest for primacy among academics. Because of the domineering approach of some individuals in the past, the field of Sikh studies has lost some brilliant scholars. Ours is a very small field that has yet to make its mark in the academy. To serve the field we must stand by our colleagues against the onslaught of anti-intellectualism. Most urgently, both Sikh and non-Sikh scholars must sustain the field by extending cooperation to each other with their individual perspectives. “Outside” scholars do make a contribution by raising important questions rather than providing definitive answers. Sikh scholars must have the confidence to respond to those questions in a civilized manner. Secondly, there are some covert challenges to the field of Sikh studies that come from behind the scenes. I had to face the challenge of resistance offered by some scholars of Indian background who were constantly opposing the establishment of Sikh studies chair at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1997 and the following years. They suggested to the university authorities that they would support a “Chair in Indian Studies” instead. Their main argument was that “Sikh studies chair” would encourage separatist tendencies among the diaspora Sikhs.

Thirdly, sometimes Sikh donors and community representatives do not properly understand the objectives of academic standards maintained in the study of various religious traditions at a public university. It is incumbent upon them to play a proactive role in the process of town-gown cooperation. They should always use circumspection in their approach without interfering in the academic programs of the university. Any kind of interference will seriously damage the legitimacy of the program of Sikh studies itself. From the university’s perspective, any area studies or special endowed chair has to be evaluated in terms of the institution’s resources and academic focus. The Sikh community must share a commitment to the full institutionalization of the Sikh Studies Program, including regular liaison and the maintenance of a core curriculum involving Sikh studies, Punjabi language, and culture. Fourthly, the main challenge is to attract new students in the field of Sikh studies. Most of the Sikh parents in the diaspora encourage their children to go for careers in medicine, law, engineering, computer science, and other high-paying professions. However, discipline-based training in Sikh studies within the perimeters of humanities and social sciences can open a wide range of academic appointment options for young men and women contemplating commitment to a lifetime of scholarship in the field. The main objective of Sikh studies chairs is to train a generation of promising young scholars by providing them with some long-term faculty appointments in the field of Sikh studies.

Finally, scholars have to deal with the challenges offered by the politics of right-wing groups within different communities who try to enforce their own views on scholarly issues. Academic scholarship cannot be based on conspiracies. Scholars often do not agree on certain issues, and this is precisely the nature of an academic debate. No scholar can afford to make final claims about one’s findings. Advancement of knowledge takes place only through the presentation of better evidence or a fresh theoretical framework on the subject, not by attacking the proponent of the idea we dislike. What we need to learn is an open attitude towards all serious questions. We should always keep in mind that opposition to academic scholarship is sometimes heightened by ideological positioning

within different factions in the body politic of a religious community. Most of the time reactionary and fundamentalist forces are responsible for creating a climate of intolerance. In this kind of situation, people lock themselves into religious or ideological cocoons, forcing others, through intimidation, to conform to their viewpoints. In the final analysis, all intolerance is fascist, for it silences the individual voice – and the individual conscience. The real issue is between academic freedom, a value taken for granted in the West, and a dogmatic stand based on the unholy mix of religious fundamentalism and manipulative politics, which does not tolerate alternative interpretation of a sacred text.

ASM

For me, challenges and new possibilities are intertwined. Certainly, the community needs to better educate itself about the nature of secular humanities in the university. In the 1980s and 1990s many of those who opposed the creation of endowed chairs were scientists, doctors, or engineers who had never had any experience of humanistic studies in Western universities. These days, and almost two generations later, there are now many more who have studied in liberal arts colleges and have come to appreciate the challenges that Sikh studies faces. Indeed, there have been several instances of problems having arisen where the community has had direct need of help from scholars, and the latter have responded fast. For example, I had to act as an expert witness on several occasions in the aftermath of 9/11. I was involved in several legal cases working with community leaders and advocacy groups to push back against discrimination against the wearing of turbans (there was a point in the early 2000s when turban-wearing Sikhs were discriminated in jobs and for boarding public transport). Expert academic testimony in a case against the NYPD, presentations to US Senators, and my involvement with a community delegation that went to the NY State Legislature in 2002, as well as discussions and talks at the French embassy in NY in 2004 (in the aftermath of the French ban on religious clothing in public) helped policy and lawmakers make more informed decisions. More recently coordination between Sikh studies scholars resulted in a successful petition against a shady Canadian think tank with a record of influencing policy makers to adopt an anti-Sikh stance. These actions discredited an effort which, had it not been checked, could have adversely influenced the global media. My point is that communities should not underestimate the positive, and at times critical, role that Sikh studies can play in the public sphere. This will become even more critical as right-wing governments (in India, Europe, and North America) attempt to use the Sikhs as pawns in geopolitical games.

On a slightly different note, there are challenges that if properly addressed will offer new and positive directions both for the field of Sikh studies and for its communities. Sikh studies will at some stage expand into new disciplines such as philosophy, theology, health, and science. The emergence of Sikh philosophy and theology will help Sikh ideas enter into global discourses and give new generations of Sikh and non-Sikh students the confidence to intellectually and spiritually engage the world in ways that physical identity and emphasizing one's ethnicity can never hope to do. I urge scholars and students and the public to watch that particular space. By health, I am thinking especially of the sphere of mental health. I'm currently involved in workshops with clinical psychologists and mental health therapists who want to learn how to develop deeper and more sophisticated conceptual understandings of Sikh concepts in the context of the health sciences. For me this is simply an application of Sikh philosophy and theology towards the sciences. This includes Sikh involvement in thinking about climate change, political and social activism, and the broader field of ethics.

Another challenge for Sikh studies has to do with publishing. So far, Sikh studies publications have been confined to a narrow sector of the humanities and social sciences, slotted into area studies or religious studies. My point is that publishers have long pigeonholed Sikhs, Sikhism and Sikh

studies into a very marginal position, making it virtually impossible for Sikh studies scholarship to articulate the *complexity* of the Sikh world as a world that is always in between and at the intersection of other worlds, other cultures, and thought processes. In other words, the “Sikh world” does not exist in a self-contained or hermetically sealed bubble. Yet this is exactly where publishers keep placing this field. Again, all this has to do with the knowledge system and its colonial legacy. To give a simple example, when I’ve tried to put forward the idea of Sikh philosophy in relation to other philosophies and thought processes, publishers (especially university presses) say they can’t market anything that crosses “boundaries,” or that they have set listings and can’t cater for anything beyond this. Basically, they’ve created an identity-based pigeon hole for Sikhs and Sikhism much in the way that European colonialism did. The challenge for Sikh studies is to break out of these pigeonholes, to put pressure on publishers to conceptually broaden their listings. This is where future endowments can play a part. Endowments can help publishers break out of their self-imposed constraints and think about new formats and more hybridized lists that reflect the inherent complexity of the Sikh world.

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